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## Working Politics: Juan Domingo Perón's Creation of Positive Social Identity

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Charismatic leaders have the power to create social change through their discourse. Two of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's key claims in their 1980 publication *Metaphors We Live By* are that "Much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones" (145) and "whether in national politics or in everyday interaction, people in power get to impose their metaphors" (157, quoting Charlotte Linde). In the 1940s, Juan Domingo Perón, the charismatic populist president of Argentina, employed one significant new metaphor, "politics is work," in his political discourse. This metaphor gave the previously disenfranchised working class a positive identity and at the same time extended opportunities for political participation. The socio-political background is a necessary prelude to understanding why this metaphor is so powerful, followed by a brief review of Perón and his rise to power, a summary of pertinent literature on metaphor and political discourse, a detailing of the methodology used, and finally, a look at the instances of Perón's new metaphor, "politics is work."

Juan Domingo Perón, president of Argentina from 1946 to 1955, was the leader of dramatic political and social change. Thousands of urban workers thronged to hear him speak and show their support of him, while the middle and upper classes bit back their disgust or secretly plotted to remove him from office. Even today, Argentines young and old have an opinion, usually vehemently expressed, about Perón.

In the 1930s and 1940s, over a million people moved from the poorer provinces of Argentina to Buenos Aires, desperately seeking work. There was little room in proper society for the migrants from the interior — they worked in "the worst-paid and lowest-status jobs" (Andrews 210), often in the factories and meat-packing plants. Historian Daniel James describes this period as a time when the lives of the workers were completely controlled by the employer; fear of unemployment,

despair and cynicism were prevalent (25-26). While the factory owners were reaping great profits, they were not passed on to the workers, many of whom lived in miserable conditions. "A survey of 1937 found ... that 60% of working class families in the Capital lived in one room" (James 8). In interviews of two workers from that time period, James received the following comments: "Well life was very hard back then ... working people weren't worth anything and we got no respect from those who controlled everything. You had to know your place and keep in line" and

One thing I remember about the thirties was the way you were treated. You felt you didn't have rights to anything ... Another thing I remember ... is that I always felt strange when I went to the city, downtown Buenos Aires — like you didn't belong there, which was stupid but you felt that they were looking down on you, that you weren't dressed right. (29)

Regarding the norms of dress and neighborhood access, James further notes, "Up until 1945 the Plaza [de Mayo] in front of the presidential palace had been very much the territory of the *gente decente* [decent people] and workers who ventured there without jacket or tie were not infrequently moved on or even arrested" (33).

The 1930s and early 1940s were a period of widespread electoral fraud in Argentina. According to James, the common refrain at election time was, "You voted, now get on home quick" [*Ya votaste, rajá pronto para tu casa*] (15). Parties opposing the status quo had little hope of winning through elections; they were repeatedly rigged. The wealthy and powerful were "untouchable," although their scandalous behavior was reported regularly. Overall, the worker of Buenos Aires had little economic and political power, and no social prestige whatsoever.

Hundreds of works have been written about Juan Domingo Perón and his government. The perspectives of Argentine literature and scholars elsewhere vary widely. In the U.S., Barager's early and widely-read work on Perón is extremely negative and accuses him of fascism. David Rock's authoritative histories of Argentina are more balanced, but still quite critical of Perón. More recent works that discuss Perón (Fraser and Navarro, James) also present both positive and negative aspects of the man and his government. One of the difficulties in carrying out research on this period and on the Peróns, as noted by Fraser and Navarro (x), is that many source documents are inaccessible.

Perón was from "an immigrant middle-class family" (Rock, *Argentina ... Alfonsín* 252). He was a career military officer who was stationed in the Argentine provinces in the 1930s and also in Italy for a period of about two years, beginning in 1939. He became responsible for training young military recruits, as Professor of Military History (Fraser and Navarro 37).

Historians differ in their views of Perón's military experience and its application to his role as president. According to Rock, he learned the ropes of "the complex, devious, and secretive recesses of military politics" (252) which presumably served him later as Secretary of War and then President. Those who accuse Perón of being a fascist assert that he became fascinated by Mussolini during his stay in Italy (Barager 27). Fraser and Navarro see Perón's military experience in a different light: "Because of his contacts with recruits, his first-hand experience of garrison life, and his close view of rural poverty, he was able to grasp the realities of Argentina (36). At any rate, during his first presidency, Perón was strongly supported by the military, unusual in Latin America for a leader who also had tremendous working class support.

Perón was a member of an officers' group that effected a coup in June 1943 to prevent yet another president from being elected fraudulently. There was some shuffling of positions among this group, and by February 1944, General Edelmiro Farrell became the third president of the military group. Perón stepped into Farrell's former position as Secretary of War, and in June 1944 became Vice President. Rock notes,

As the first half of 1944 passed, it became clear that Farrell himself was little more than a figurehead, that the government's most powerful figure was Farrell's aide, Colonel Juan Perón. Though Perón remained a somewhat shadowy figure, he was quietly emerging as the most energetic, imaginative, and politically adroit of the revolutionary leaders. (252)

Perón used his position as Secretary of War to bolster the military. He also became involved with labor affairs and created the Secretariat for Labor and Social Welfare in October 1943. This agency was built on a previous government department, but Perón greatly expanded its role and his, as Secretary. Perón began intervening in strikes and made decisions that favored the workers. He developed a huge following among the rank and file, but also created a union system that would respect his leadership. He dealt only with "those unions recognized by his secretariat as possessing full legal standing [*personería gremial*]. By this means he isolated those union leaders opposed to dealing with him" (Rock 254).

Factory owners and other capital interests did not easily accept Perón's decisions that took money out of their pockets and put it in the workers'. They combined their efforts with those of U.S. Ambassador Spruille Braden, to demand that President Farrell remove Perón from all government functions and jail him. In September 1945, a massive march by opponents to Perón and Farrell was held in Buenos Aires, and Farrell acquiesced to their demands.

The opposition did not immediately act to take over the entire government once Perón was removed. This gave Perón's supporters time to organize. Led by his intimate associates, including Eva Duarte, Perón's soon-to-be wife, a seemingly spontaneous march of thousands of workers burst into central Buenos Aires on October 17, 1945. They demanded that Perón be freed and returned to them.

This massive show of support for Perón effected his release and return to government alongside Farrell. Elections were announced for February 1946, and Perón was the primary candidate. He and his Vice-Presidential candidate Hortensio Quijano won the elections with 54 percent of the vote, despite a last-minute defamation campaign by the United States. By all accounts, the elections were free from the fraud and ballot rigging that had plagued Argentine suffrage in the past.

Perón and his wife Eva made vast improvements for the working class of Argentina, both in Buenos Aires and the provinces. These improvements included material benefits such as schools, hospitals, and roads; items such as houses, beds, medicine, and sewing machines were provided through the Eva Perón Foundation, paid for, in part, by forced contributions from workers. But the Peróns extended intangible benefits as well, which were perhaps more important than goods and services. As previously indicated, the urban workers had a dismal life, many futilely trying to escape the harsh isolation and scarcity found in the provinces. They were not well-received by the "decent people" [*gente decente*] of Buenos Aires, and quickly received derogatory nicknames such as "little black heads" [*cabecitas negras*], "shirtless ones" [*descamisados*], and "greasers" [*grasitas*]. The Peróns extended dignity to the workers, making work an honorable occupation and creating a powerful group identity. Daniel James writes, "In an important sense the working class [of Argentina] was constituted by Perón: its self-identification as a social and political force within national society was, in part at least, constructed by Peronist political discourse" (38).

Perón's first presidential period ended in 1952, and he was re-elected to begin a second six-year term, then deposed in 1955, and later returned from exile in Spain to hold the presidency again in the 1970s. The following focuses only on the first presidential period, 1946-1952.

One of the keys to Perón's success with the working class was an extraordinary ability to communicate — to create vision and enthusiasm, to motivate followers. His speeches, often made from the balcony of the Casa Rosada, were enthusiastically received by thousands. Historians have commented on Perón's style of speech, using phrases such as "direct and friendly, neither hectoring nor condescending"

(Fraser and Navarro 34) and “theatricality, display, and charismatic authority ... semantic legerdemain” (Rock 285-86).

We can assess the means used by Perón to construct social identity, using a cognitive approach to examine his use of metaphor, in particular as first developed by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980, and Lakoff and Turner in 1989. Modern metaphor theory refutes the idea that metaphors are unusual poetic devices rather than part of everyday speech. Lakoff and his colleagues found that metaphors were present regularly and in nearly every realm of speech and thought. According to this approach, based on the sheer predominance of metaphors in human speech, metaphor is a central human way of conceptualizing, used “unconsciously and automatically ... for understanding life” (Lakoff and Turner 5). Lakoff goes as far as to assert that “Metaphor is the main mechanism through which we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning” and that “Much subject matter, from the most mundane to the most abstruse scientific theories, can only be comprehended via metaphor” (“Contemporary Theory of Metaphor” 41).

In metaphor theory, metaphors are seen as a very frequent and common way of referring to and understanding one thing, known as the “target domain” (often an abstract concept) in terms of another (usually something tangible), called the “source domain.”

According to metaphor theory, an examination of commonplace metaphorical expressions yields a group of basic, overarching metaphors that are held by members of a given society. In their book *More Than Cool Reason*, Lakoff and Turner explore the metaphorical expressions surrounding life and death. They observe that in U.S. English, one finds expressions such as “We’ve still got a lot of ground to cover,” “He’s really going places,” “Baby Jones came into the world at 12:10 p.m.,” “My time to leave this place is near,” etc. Lakoff and Turner then asserted that common, basic metaphors about life and death include “life is a journey,” “birth is arrival,” and “death is departure.”

Each metaphor has a set of correspondences, or mappings from the source domain to the target domain. For example, the “life is a journey” metaphor relates to our common experience of journeys and a general set of expectations about them such as point of departure, type of transportation, a path, a destination, perhaps a guide or a map, and so on, that we take from the source domain and map onto life in the following ways: “The person leading a life is a traveler; his purposes are destinations; the means for achieving purposes are routes; progress is the distance traveled,” etc. (3). This transfer of concrete to abstract allows us to better understand abstract concepts.

Contemporary metaphor theory does not discard what were traditionally considered “metaphors,” but rather sees them as novel extensions of basic metaphors. For example, in the metaphor “love is a journey,” common linguistic expressions that evidence this metaphor might be “We’re at a dead-end,” “This relationship is going too fast,” and “We’re going nowhere.” A novel extension of this metaphor is “We’re driving in the fast lane on the freeway of love” (“Contemporary” 8). This type of expression “works” precisely because it makes use of possible extensions of the source domain “journey” that, while not commonly used, are understandable and applicable to the target domain “love.”

Linguists have remarked on the interaction between language and society for at least fifty years. Edward Sapir commented, “Though language is not ordinarily thought of as of essential interest to students of social science, it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes” (qtd. in Mandelbaum 162). Sapir’s student, Benjamin Whorf, observed that “people act about situations in ways which are like the ways they talk about them” (148). These two linguists came under attack for their ideas: the assertion that one’s worldview is shaped and limited by one’s language was not easily accepted.

Metaphor is just one specific part of language and thought that affects social processes, as proposed more generally by Sapir and Whorf. If human understanding is in large part metaphorical, then metaphor can be a powerful tool for communicating, persuading, and effecting change. Lakoff and Johnson were the first to assert that metaphors “play a central role in the construction of social and political reality” (159).

Since Lakoff and Johnson’s 1980 publication, several studies relating to language, politics, and social change have been carried out (e.g., Howe; Lakoff, “Metaphor and War”; Lakoff, *Moral Politics*; Rohrer; Curry Jansen and Sabo; Van Teeffelen; and Semino and Masci). These researchers focus on the use of metaphors by politicians to communicate and effect social change. In general, the literature on political discourse and metaphor as a subpart of this discourse falls into two groups. Lakoff and others assert that new metaphors can construct new reality. Another proponent of this view, Van Teeffelen, claims, “it has become common knowledge in cognitive and cultural studies that metaphors do not only embellish a preconstituted reality for rhetorical purposes, but also contribute to the construction and understanding of social reality itself” (384).

Geis, Rohrer, and Semino and Masci, among others, argue that while metaphor may change the focus of people’s thinking, new metaphors are quite hard to introduce. Rohrer observes, “Political language does not create political reality. However, political institutions clearly legitimize some understandings of political

reality while marginalizing other understandings" (179). He tempers Lakoff and Johnson's and Van Teeffelen's strong claim, saying, "Although political language and metaphor do not by themselves create political realities, political language and metaphorical reasoning do substantially constitute our understanding of political reality and political events" (179).

Semino and Masci argue that new metaphors create "red flags" in the hearers' minds, and that old metaphors with slight changes may be more persuasive:

This partly creative use of conventional metaphors ... can be an effective way of presenting one's own view of reality as "natural" and "common-sense" and of reducing the chances that the audience will notice and challenge the metaphors involved. (245)

Thus we can see how Perón, a very articulate and persuasive politician, created and used only one new metaphor, "politics is work," to shape both political reality and social identity.<sup>1</sup>

In order to discover if Perón inserted new metaphors in Argentine discourse and society, we can examine metaphors found in Buenos Aires society in the ten years prior to Perón's succession, comparing and contrasting them with metaphors used by Perón in his speeches during the first six years of his presidency. In fact, Perón created and used one entirely new metaphor: "politics is work."

Photocopies of magazine and newspaper articles and Perón's speeches were obtained during a research trip to Argentina in February 1997. For the period 1936-1946 (the ten years prior to Perón's first presidency), two publications were examined for metaphorical expressions. More than 63,000 words of text were examined from *Caras y Caretas* (a popular Argentine magazine similar to the U.S. publication *Life*) from 1936 to 1939, when publication ended. Issues from this time period were chosen at random from those available for photocopying at the Biblioteca Pública General San Martín in Mendoza, Argentina. Approximately 19,700 words of text of the newspaper *El Mundo*, a national daily, were also examined. These were drawn from the issues available at the Biblioteca del Congreso for the first Monday of the month for the period 1936-1946, specifically the front page and the editorial page. (The Monday issue was considered to be the most significant one). This led to the establishment of the common metaphors in currency prior to Perón's presidency. The second corpus is based on an analysis of six speeches made by Juan Domingo Perón during his first six years as President of Argentina (1946-1952), a total of approximately 16,295 words of text.

Individual metaphorical expressions were taken verbatim from the texts and then grouped into categories of major metaphors. For the popular texts, a "major metaphor" was considered to be one for which at least ten individual metaphori-

cal references were found, an arbitrary cut-off point. Because the corpus for Perón's speeches was so much smaller, five metaphorical expressions were the cut-off point to be considered a "major metaphor."

Upon comparing these sets of data, it became evident that Perón introduced only one entirely new metaphor to Argentine society through his speeches. There were many current metaphors he did not use, and many he altered. I focus only on his new metaphor, "politics is work," a structural metaphor. Structural metaphors provide understanding of one concept in terms of another, often very familiar, experience. This was especially appealing to the large working-class constituency of Buenos Aires, as they could all identify with work. The entailments found in the 19 metaphorical expressions include products, wages, and employees, and specific types of work. Words indicating production are "product" [*producto*], "to create, to work" [*labrar*], and "to build" [*elaborar*].<sup>2</sup>

1 *El bienestar, la abundancia, y aún la felicidad del pueblo, no es obra de un gobierno ... sino el producto de la acción del pueblo mismo.* [The well-being, abundance, and even the happiness of the people are not the work of the government ... but the product of the action of the people themselves.] (18/2/52, 8)

2 ... *la renta del país es producto del trabajo* ... [... the country's profits are the product of work ...] (1/5/52, 57)

3 ... *haber labrado la grandeza de la Patria.* [... for having created the greatness of the fatherland.] (17/10/46, 5)

4 ... *en las fábricas que elaboran la riqueza de la Patria.* [... in the factories that build the wealth of the Fatherland.] (1/5/52, 57)

The products in these examples are both monetary and intangible items, all for the benefit of Argentina or Argentines. The expressions relate to the target domain "politics" because politicians are expected to create all the products mentioned: well-being, abundance, happiness of the people, a sound economy, and greatness of the Fatherland.

The political benefit of rights is expressed as wages, something "earned" [*ganado*] through work:

5 *No ganan el derecho a la felicidad.* [They don't earn the right to happiness.] (18/2/52, 8)

6 ... *después de haberse ganado ese derecho trabajando, sin medir los sacrificios, por la grandeza de la Patria.* [... after having earned that right by working, without measuring sacrifices, for the greatness of the Fatherland.] (1/5/52, 12)

Instead of referring to money as wages, Perón makes money an "employee." He could have used other verbs in the following expressions, such as "to use" [*usar*] or "to utilize" [*utilizar*], but he chose "to employ" [*emplear*]:



7 ... *empleó muchos millones* ... [... he employed many millions ...] (25/7/49, 11)

8 ... *no empleamos paladas de millones*. [... we didn't employ shovelful of millions.] (25/7/49, 11)

These two quotations refer to U.S. Ambassador to Argentina Spruille Braden's active involvement in Perón's political opponent's campaign. Thus, money was an employee in the work of politics.

Workers need tools. Perón sometimes refers to the political process as a tool, and in other cases people are tools, manipulated in others' hands. Perón indicated that political processes are a "lever" [*palanca*], a type of tool that lifts, thus interacting with the common spatial metaphor: "good is up."

9 *Este proceso de transformación orgánica ... será en el futuro la palanca que daremos al movimiento peronista y que permitirá levantar y mover a la República para el bien de la patria*. [This process of organic transformation ... will in the future be the lever that we will give to the Peronist movement and that will permit it to lift and move the Republic for the good of the fatherland.] (25/7/49, 8-9)

In other expressions, people can either be "skilled craftsmen" [*artífices*], working for themselves, or "instruments" [*instrumentos*], tools manipulated in others' hands:

10 ... *todos seamos artífices del destino común, pero ningún instrumento de la ambición de nadie*. [... let us all be craftsmen of the common destiny, but none of us the tool of anyone's ambition.] (25/7/49, 21)

11 *Los pueblos, como los hombres, son los únicos artífices de su propia felicidad*. [The peoples, like men, are the only craftsmen of their happiness.] (1/5/52, 29)

Again, intangible things like destiny and happiness are the products of Perón's work.

In addition to the general term "skilled craftsman" [*artífice*], Perón specifies two types of work, both manual labor. The first is construction, indicated by the words "to construct" [*construir*] and "to lift [*lif*], to build" [*levantar*].

12 ... *pagamos su deuda y estamos construyendo una nueva Argentina para lo cual no escatimamos ni trabajo ni sacrificios*. [... we paid their debt and we are building a new Argentina for which we don't skimp on work or sacrifice.] (25/7/49, 12)

13 ... *por cada uno de estos detractores inconstructivos surgirá un nuevo peronista decidido a construir y a levantar*. [... for every one of those unconstructive detractors, a Peronist will come up, determined to construct and build.] (8/3/50, 6)

The second specific type of work metaphorically applied to “politics” is agricultural work. Terms expressing the agriculture entailment are “field” [*campo*] and “planting” [*siembra*]:

14 *El que trabaja por su cuenta, que se vaya a otro campo.* [He who works for himself, let him go to another field.] (25/7/49, 15)

15 *Las divisas ... van al pueblo en nuestra siembra permanente de bienestar.* [The profits ... go to the people in our permanent planting of well-being.] (1/5/52, 57)

16 ... *doctrina peronista que he inculcado en el alma de todos los trabajadores de esta tierra y que, como una siembra prodigiosa, prolifera entre los trabajadores de América y del mundo.* [... the Peronist doctrine that I have inculcated in the soul of all the workers of this land and that, like a prodigious planting, proliferates among the workers of America and of the world.] (1/5/52, 75)

In expression 14, Perón is admonishing selfish Peronists and exhorting them to work for the common good, not selfish ends. Expressions 15 and 16 refer to well-being and the Peronist doctrine, two amorphous ideas, as plants in the field of Peronism.

“Politics is work” is obviously an important new metaphor, central to Perón’s area of greatest focus and support, the urban workers of Buenos Aires, and the greater political participation he invited from them, albeit in the form of corporatism. It was not present in the popular publications prior to Perón’s presidency. “Politics is work” is extremely meaningful in light of the previously described social climate. The metaphor gave workers a powerful new identity, making work a positive activity, rather than something to be looked down on. It dignified the working class, and opened political participation up to them for the first time. Thus, by the use of this metaphor, Perón affirmed and empowered those who were his greatest supporters. ✨

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Perón made slight alterations in many existing metaphors. See Berhó, “Bad Circles.”

<sup>2</sup> All translations are the author’s.

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