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Children in Peronism: Through the Lens of *Privilegiados*

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Abstract

How are children valued within the state apparatus? Scholars of 1950s Argentina have had an increasing interest in children being an influential component to the success of Juan Peron and his almost cultish following, the *Peronistas* (Peronists). This paper will explore the effects Peronist propaganda had in influencing the youth through the lens of an analysis of a children's book from the second presidency of Juan Peron. *Privilegiados* is a book published in 1954 and is designed for children six years of age. I will create an understanding of the construction of myth and narrative revolving around not only Juan Peron and the Peronistas but also his wife Evita, but also the affect they create and the emotion which it produces within the Argentine people. It is the aim of this paper to establish a relationship between motherhood, nurture, the state, and fervent political loyalty throughout Peronist and post-Peronist Argentina. The power of both images and diction will be taken into account when encountering the effects of the text. Small details such as color, shape, font, etc., will help in clarifying that this text is not only a children's book but a tool for populist rhetoric. The paper will help bring further understanding of not only the power of children's literature within the shaping of a state, but the importance children hold in both 20th century and contemporary politics.

Introduction

Children are key in the building of a successful state. Children are the future of every society, but in many cases, their value can be ignored. This is not the case in Peronist Argentina, where children were seen as important independent actors within the Argentine state. Juan and

Evita Peron are the most dominant figures in twentieth-century Argentine politics, and with a fleet of propaganda pushed during their regime, Peronism became a mainstay in Argentine politics up to the present day.

Privilegiados is one of many pieces of children's literature produced by the Peronist regime. This picture book is emblematic of the goal of the regime. That was to create loyal, proud, and fervent Peronists, to make children valuable actors and voters within Peronism. By analyzing the visual elements of *Privilegiados*, a sense of where children fall within the Peronist regime will be established, and the role of the Perons within the narrative and myth of Argentine lives and the affect and emotion they instill will be clarified.

What is Peronism?

Peronism is a political ideology and movement born from Argentina's most prominent political figure of the 20th century, Juan Peron. Peronism is a movement that still takes hold of Argentina today and is the most influential political movement in Argentine history. Juan Peron took power in Argentina in 1943 with a military coup and was elected to office three times, with Peronist parties after his death still dominating Argentine politics. In fact today the Partido Justicialista (the largest Peronist party in Argentina today) holds half of the seats in senate.

Even with Peronism being so prominent in Argentine life, it is difficult to define. The categories applicable in most countries seem inadequate to define it: it is clearly populism (the archetype according to some), it is not exactly fascism but exhibits many of its key characteristics, it is not socialism but relies on a class warfare rhetoric and advocates income and wealth redistribution (Ocampo 2020). Peronism is uniquely populist in how it divides people, in that it caters towards the poor and the marginalized classes and pits them against much of the

country. But, Peronism, despite its roots being in labor unions and the military, was desperate to expand its voting base and to engage support from all of Argentina. It is unique in that it truly spread across all of Argentina and provided a sense of nationalist ideology which united the Argentine people. Peronism was a version of populism that equated the Peronist regime with Argentina itself. The most important of that voting base was arguably, children.

The Role of Children in Peronism

Children are of course the future of any country, but in everyday life children almost fall within the background of society. But children are of course actors of the state, similar to anyone else. Peron saw children as an opportunity and his wife Evita was the mother to those children. Evita herself was key in reaching out towards those who were marginalized by society, by the classes ignored by many, and by any child who needed support. Eva (Evita) Peron made her and her husband's relationship with children clear with this statement in 1950.

We will try to bring Peronism to the soul of the Argentine child...because we reserve the right to see that Argentine children learn to love the fatherland and Perón from the cradle. Because now...all Argentine children, I believe, even before they learn to say 'Papa', should say Perón¹

The Eva Peron Foundation was established in 1948 and was instrumental in the state apparatus in making the Peron regime appeal to the masses. The Eva Peron Foundation established a personal relationship between the ruler and the ruled, with Evita being the figurehead for a united Argentine state. By 1950 the Eva Peron Foundation controlled assets of some \$200 million and its projects took priority over those of the government (Foss 2000). The Eva Peron Foundation

¹ Eva Perón, Speech given to provincial governors (1950), as cited in Brinkerhoff, *The Experience of Children in Perón's Argentina: Recent Interventions and Future Directions*, p. 835

built housing, hospitals, schools, and would send out five million toys and four million bottles of cider and pieces of cake as Christmas presents to children. Every gift bore a message from Evita and her husband. Argentines still spoke of their admiration and deep feeling the gifts gave them as children (Foss 2000).

The Eva Peron Foundation had ambitious projects such as *La Ciudad Infantil* (Children's city) an initiative that took two city blocks of Buenos Aires and converted it into a daycare and education center for children. The Peron's were devoted to children and their education, in a society where children with constant reminders of the Perons as their schools, hospitals, and streets were named after them and the images of the Perons plastered all over Argentina, it became almost normal to see the names of Evita and Juan in there education, to see these two in their textbooks and picture books was normal.

The Effect of Children's Literature and Nationalism

Education is key in every child's life, as they learn to read, write and become functioning member's of society. Literature is a large part of that forming of a child's mind, as they read picture books from a young age, making images correlate with words to create meaning. Bonomo et al. (1999) writes, "A picture book must have both an engaging and appealing art. The two work in concert to to create meaning through transaction with the reader" (p. 146). What elements of a book appeal to a reader, whether it be children or adults, how do these elements create certain emotions. These different elements include lines, color, technique, texture, composition, and diction. All these elements add to visual literacy, which is the ability to construct meaning from visual images (Bonomo et al. 1999).

From a children's book from a nation's perspective, it is important to note the use of symbols within the pages. The idea of the nation itself is tied very closely with childhood. The word "nation" refers to the idea of "being born" and thereby localizes and connects a prime term in identity to the personal identity of those individual subjects for whom the nation (their nation) is home (Kelen and Sundmark 2014). A child is of course not born a nationalist or a fervent loyalist to a political leader, but these values are instead instilled within them as they interact with the society around them. Symbols are an easy way to signal the nation and belonging to any person and can be instilled within a child. Simple colors, such as "red, white, and blue" in the United States, or the Turul eagle in Hungary, are simple and effective ways to instill what it means to be part of a nation to a child. Words and language are also symbolic in that they are easy ways for a nation to identify itself and to set itself in opposition to others, whether that be with others within that nation or outside that nation.

It is important to remember that the idea of "the nation" does not exactly constitute every single citizen of a certain country, it is instead citizens that fall within that definition of a "national citizen". These definitions of who is a citizen are something that is instilled in children, whether it be from their home, from the state, or from their interactions with others, the nation is defined in certain ways that may exclude many. Even in such a broad and encompassing version of nationalism from Peronism there are still those who are excluded from Peron's idea of Argentina.

Theoretical Approach

Looking into *Privilegiados*, analyzing the visual elements will be to look at the Peronist effect on Children through its appeal to affect and emotion and its building of narrative and

myth. All of these elements add to create a national imagination within a child and develop a sense of nationalist identity. Affect and emotional appeal are the use of emotion, whether irrational or rational, to bring people together in populist politics and to rally voters. The Peronist regime used affect in to appeal to the ethos of the Argentine population. Affect is the emotional potential, is the inner workings of a person, while emotion is the actualization of that affect. But I would say nationalist children's literature is building that affect within its citizens from an early age, it is creating affect that is brought out by these symbols that are also instilled within a child's mind, that is reinforced with narrative and myth.

Symbols also build this narrative this myth, and children's literature can be a key part in development when building a nationalist myth and narrative, and in this case, a myth surrounding Peron, a narrative for his regime. A narrative is a story, one that encourages an audience to identify with the values and actions within it, words and images can help build this narrative. While myth provides characters, origins, and purpose to build a story. In the case of *Privilegiados* the characters are mainly Juan and Evita Peron. These two characters help build the myth and narrative of the nation, through the story. Juan and Evita become symbols within themselves and create visual literacy through their images. Affect, emotion, narrative, and myth are all built within the elements of visual literacy (lines, color, technique, texture, composition, and diction) to help instill Peron's version of an Argentine in a child.

Image One

The importance of a child as an individual is key in building a loyal base to the Peronist regime, the regime tries to strip away "self-actualization" from the child. Self-actualization is the ability for a child to develop a sense of individuality and have the ability to critique both the state

and the people around them. From the state's viewpoint, education for self-actualization is often geared more toward developing personal critical capacity than toward securing social conformity and obedience (Fineman 1999). The Peronist regime's goal is to strip genuine self-actualization and to instead enforce a bias version of self-actualization that creates a citizen that is uncritical of the Peronist regime.

Privilegiados

Privilegiados is one of many children's books produced during the Peronist regime. This book was specifically geared towards six-year-old children and is produced to help a child develop reading and writing skills. The book teaches children basic words such as "tomate" (tomato) and "tia" (aunt), but alongside this are words like "Evita". Looking at *image one* and *two*, it puts Evita alongside "your mother" and puts her in the same context as the most basic parts of learning, like spelling, and sounds that are the building blocks of Argentine Spanish. *Image one* has the phrases "Eva loved mom" and "Eva loved me". Equating such strong emotions like love is important in creating strong affect towards the regime within the child, and in the picture, you can see the child and mother pointing towards the picture of Eva while in discussion. Eva is a point of curiosity not only for the child in the picture but the child reading. And this book clarifies just how important Evita is. Evita within this picture is not only seen as a motherly figure to the child, but to the mother itself, and is in a place that holds more importance to the child than her mother. In the picture, Evita is above both the mother and child and almost takes a deity-like presence within the picture and the page. Especially since the phrases are written within the past tense. Evita is a mythical figure, something that did exist, and loved both the child and the mother. This book was published in 1954, Eva Peron died in 1952. The regime

has not moved on from her image, she is still extremely prominent. She entered a christ-like realm as someone who still is very influential in the lives of Argentines, even if she is not breathing. That comparison with Christ is interesting in a country dominated by Christianity, as the Perons are seeking to supplant religion in many senses and establish themselves as a national religion.

The eventual downfall of Peron was because of his biggest opposers, the Catholic Church. Foss (2000) writes, "...[Peron's] opposition to the well established Catholic youth organisations brought a fatal conflict with the Church. Here Peron met his match. Despite a decade of Peronist propaganda, the Church still retained a hold over much of the population and became a focus of opposition" (p. 14). Peronism in many ways is creating a national religion, one that is opposing the Church and replacing the Church as a place that cares and protects the people. Peron is a character not only within these books and propaganda, but within the Argentine consciousness, he is the father and Evita is the mother of the Peronist people. With Evita taking on a more hands-on role with the Argentine people. For example, every single day Evita would arrive at her office and receive citizens that came in needing help. Every day, she saw hundreds of hopefuls and desperate and tried to fulfill their needs (Foss 2000). Evita was the mother figure of the regime, she was the Mary of the Church of Peron. Even within aspects of International relations, Evita was Argentina's ambassador, meeting with various world leaders, not Juan. After her death, Eva lived on and today is one of the most famous and influential figures in all of Argentina. Eva Peron was herself the best propaganda the regime ever had (Foss 2000).

Looking at *Image two* again it at the top of the second page there is a picture of Evita with children by her side. In this sense, Evita is not only a mother but a teacher, as the children

look onto what she is writing. The soft green color behind her eliminates any sense of intimidation and her smile tells the reader she is both kind and approachable. But the suit she wears and the dark color it beholds is evident of a sort of confidence, respect, and intelligence she holds. She is both strong, caring, intelligent, and respected, and so is the Peronist regime. The children look in awe at Evita, and hold her in high attention, she is the focus of the picture, she is the focus of their attention. Evita is representative of the regime, she is the center of attention, so therefore so is the regime. Evita is just as important as basic spelling, as the mother and the home, and therefore the regime is just as important as well.

It is not to be ignored that not only is Evita seen as a motherly figure, but every mother within *Privilegiados* also has blonde hair and fair skin just as Evita does. Evita is the model for every mother in Argentina. The home is such an important place for children, the home is what Evita invades within these texts. She is part of the everyday lives of Argentinians and represents their homelife. This is transcending the traditional boundaries between the political world and the personal lives of the citizens, the Perons are an essential aspect of personal lives. In Helen Martin's (1935) study on Nationalism in children's literature, she does studies on the nationalist elements of different types of children's books. She writes, "The 'home story' tends to be the most nationalistic" (p. 418). The home is what connects the nation and its people to create nationalism. In Peron's unique flavor of populist nationalism, reminiscent of having a leader's portrait on a citizen's home, he is all-encompassing, work, home, and state. Within Peronism, Peron is synonymous with the nation and the nation is synonymous with the people. Peron is Argentina.



Image One

Image Two



In *Image three* there is a common theme that is frequently shown throughout these pages. Looking at the second page of *image three* there are illustrations of the people. A public demonstration, people in the streets, with May the 1st plastered upon the upper center of the page. The demonstration is so large, that it spills over the page and is present upon both pages. This “spillover” tells us just how passionate the people are in this demonstration, that they cannot even be confined to a single page. May 1st, also known as May Day, is an international workers’ holiday and is celebrated in countries around the world. Peron took over the celebrations for May Day, converting it from a socialist to a Peronist occasion (Foss 2000). Peron is rebranding this holiday and in *image three* it doesn’t even look like much of a worker’s holiday, looks more like a political rally for Peron. With the banner with his face plastered on it, it tells children that May Day is a day for Peron, is a day that the workers celebrate their relation with Peron.

The eyes of the people at the forefront of the page are big and wide, the lines are stark and the colors bright. On the page of the overspill there is a bright blue color washing over the shapes of people, indicating movement, this movement indicates and cheerful and energetic emotion through the page. The background constitutes Buenos Aires and the faces of the people begin to fade, as it becomes evident that this is a massive crowd. All of this is to indicate to a child, a future worker, that Peron is a leader for the people, someone that both their parents and themselves should look up to. Someone widely loved, both in the home, but also in public spaces, that people are so passionate about Peron that they fill the streets. Above them all is the image of Peron. This picture is full of joy and passion and is similar to other spots within the book, but this picture also portrays Peron as both with and above the people. He is part of the people but is superior to them. He speaks for the working class and is a mainstay in both public and work spaces. The colorful images and the scene of elation are captivating for anyone, let

alone a six-year-old child learning how to read. While they learn to spell, write and read, they are learning just where Peron belongs in their lives. He is a character omnipresent within both the book and Argentine reality and creates a narrative in which he is a joyous and celebrated leader. These images instill affect. It instills that these children as workers should feel towards the regime, it instills a sense of gratefulness to Peron, something they should carry into their adult lives as active political participants.

The Argentine flags in this image are also less prominent than Peron himself, but they like the people are also with Peron. Peronism's special form of nationalism and populism shines through, as it declares itself loyal to the Argentine people, but Argentine people are Peronists. All Argentines are Peronists and being a Peronist is being a nationalist. A child is equating Peronism with being Argentine, they are one and the same.

Image Three

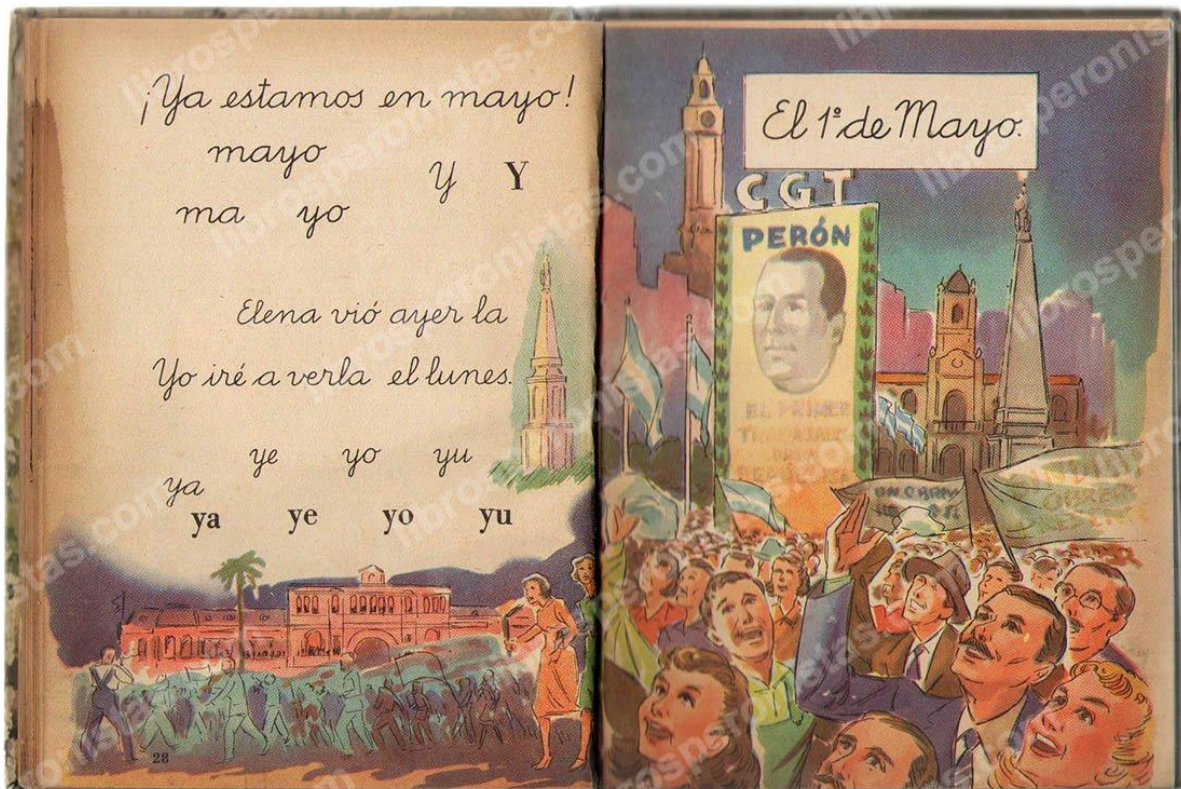




Image Four

In *image four* there is a sense of almost wonder and ecstasy, as similar images appear as *images one, two, and three*. There is this juxtaposition between the two sections, “Mi Madre” and “Dia de fiesta”. The first page is a little girl describing how valuable her mother is and how much she loves her, while the second page describes a day of celebration where planes fly over the city, and trains are filled with impassioned Argentines. The first page has a description of just how caring and hard-working the girl’s mother is, while the second page describes a city in which the windows are stained white and blue, and tells us “El pueblo tiene plena fe en sus gobernantes y los aclama”. That the people have faith in their rulers and cheer them on. *Image four* gives the reader a sense of pride. Pride that is associated with the reader’s mother and home and the government and country which control their home. Pride is in the essence of *Privilegiados* and these pages, the reader is told both to be prideful in their parents and their

government. And it is quite obvious who that government and those rulers are, with “Peron” plastered on banners drawn on the second page. The Perons and their regime are similar to every single Argentine’s mother, in that they are something to be proud of. The hard-working mother and the industrial and successful Peronist Argentina both produce passion and love within a child. The elation a child must feel not only to be an Argentine, but a Peronist must be immense.

Conclusion

Children have a voice, children are active participants within politics because they are the future of it. The Peronist regime saw that, and they exploited it. It was not Peron’s goal to have a short-term presidency, it was instead his goal to become a mainstay in Argentine politics, and he most certainly achieved this. Even after his death, Peronist ideas have lived on, and this is due to the installation of Peron and his wife Evita as mythic figures within the narrative of Argentina. They are, without a doubt, the most influential people in Argentinian history. They instilled a sense of pride and love within the Argentine people that but paralleled them with Argentine mothers and helped them permeate into the minds of every Argentine child. Being Argentine became equivalent to being a Peronist.

Children’s literature is an important part of growing up. Every child learns to read and write and images and words become synonymous with one another when properly learning a language. Spanish is the national language of Argentina, and as these children learned their national language through these books they also learned of their place within the nation, that being both under the Peronist regime, but also in hand with them, as the Perons, especially Evita, even after her death, became the parental figures in Argentine lives. The colorful pages and

captivating images make one proud to live in Argentina at the time, making one proud to be a Peronist.

The influence of these children in 1954 Argentina can be felt today and as the twentieth century progressed those children became powerful figures in Argentine politics, joining Peronist youth movements and groups that eventually became mainstays in Peronist political parties.

Peron even returned to power in 1973, he did not take power by force but was instead voted in.

The Argentine people loved the Perons, and that love was fostered within every child under Peronist rule.

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