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Bajo el signo de las masas (1943-1973). Carlos Altamirano (Comp). Buenos Aires: Editorial Ariel, 2000.
Peronismo y cultura de izquierda. Carlos Altamirano. Buenos Aires: Temas Grupo Editorial, 2001.
La batalla de las ideas (1943-1973). Beatriz Sarlo y Carlos Altamirano. Buenos Aires: Editorial Ariel, 2001.

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The topic of Peronism shows an amazing capacity to generate new debates. The reasons are obvious: this political phenomenon changed Argentina forever, and given the scope of the transformations it brought, the debate cannot be closed yet. The turn of the century was quite prolific in the publication of works on the subject of intellectuals and Peronism, a topic that -- with the exception of some partial analyses -- still needed careful revision. Sociologist Carlos Altamirano was one of the protagonists of this "revival." He published *Peronismo y cultura de izquierda* and wrote part of the introduction of the sixth volume of the collection *Biblioteca del Pensamiento Argentino: La Batalla de las Ideas (1943-1973)*. In the first book, Altamirano compiled articles that aimed to clarify the relationship between the left and Peronism. The essays are united by one aspect that the author considers central: the "*hecho Peronista*" (the Peronist experience) that was at the core of the changes, conflicts and divisions of the Argentine culture of the left during the second half of the century. Altamirano describes the itinerary of the left, since it occupied a central place in the anti-Peronist pole during Perón's regime until a great part of the so-called culture of the left united its fate to the popular movement in the years that followed the coup that ended Perón's regime. Through the analysis of the work of various intellectuals -- such as Rodolfo Puiggrós and Julio Ramos -- the author shows how the ideological conversion implied in the passage from an "anti-Peronist left to a Peronist one" was made in the shadows, and in struggle with the major political parties of this ideological tendency (both, the Communist and the Socialist Parties) and its most consecrated figures.

According to the author, this ideological renovation of the left was accompanied by the impugning of the country's middle class and its intellectual mentors. Altamirano turns back to an argument already present in previous approaches to the theme: the fact that Peronism promoted a new generation of intellectuals that constructed their identity in opposition to the established liberal anti-Peronist intelligentsia. In the final essays, the author proposes an interesting reading of the political violence of the late sixties and seventies. He argues that this violence should be interpreted as a cycle of political radicalism, new and different from that of the period 1955-1966, not only because it incorporated a new generation, but also because it was nourished by an innovative element: a radical militant Catholicism. Altamirano's work constitutes an interesting and suggestive reading of the changing position of the culture of the left in the country. In his "narration" it becomes clear how -- sometimes with dramatic consequences -- the history of Peronism and of the country itself was also the history of the representations of this political phenomenon.

The author gives voice to different actors: publicists, priests, politicians and intellectuals, all belonging to the culture of the left. He studies a flexible universe of people and tries to establish the connection between political and intellectual history, but in the text, politics seems to be the guiding question. The author does not study the transformations introduced in the intellectual field by the *hecho peronista*, but rather the way in which the successive intellectual interpretations of Peronism changed a political tradition: that of the left.¹ And it is in this area that the essays are sometimes difficult to follow. The author never clarifies in what sense those interpretations changed the social category of "intellectual" -- such as its role in society. He does not explain the relationship between the discourses he analyses and the way they changed intellectual practices, how, for example, those discourses carried many *letrados* to abandon their intellectual life for armed struggle. Besides, the author does not inform us what happened to those men that belonged to the traditional left after their voice became marginal, when the young embraced Peronism.

The stated purpose of the recently published collection *Biblioteca del Pensamiento Argentino* edited by historian Tulio Halperín Donghi, is to provide an anthology of Argentine political thought since 1810. Each volume contains a preliminary study by a scholar specializing in the period and a selected collection of

articles, extracts of books, and pamphlets that should serve to illustrate the political debates of the time. Peronism is covered in two issues that appeared recently: *Bajo el signo de las masas*, compiled by Altamirano, and *La batalla de las ideas* compiled by Beatriz Sarlo in collaboration with Altamirano. The volumes cover the period between Perón's entrance into the political scene in 1943 until his return to the presidency in 1973. The division between the books was made by separating the actors that were part of the debate on Peronism into politicians and intellectuals. *Bajo el signo de las masas*, is strictly, then, a book on "political thinking";² it discusses and reproduces the discourse of political actors: military men, politicians, political parties, union leaders, etc. In contrast, *La batalla de las ideas* presents and discusses the discourse of intellectuals and cultural institutions understood in a broader sense to include the church and the student movement.

The preliminary study of *La batalla de las ideas*, and later its anthology, is divided into four parts. The first section, written by Altamirano, opens with the question of "what to do with the masses?". In it, the author presents the debate in which intellectuals engaged after Perón's fall that was in his view guided by the inquiry mentioned above. Altamirano sees in this discussion the "beginning of the end" of the hegemony of liberalism among intellectuals, as well as the genesis of topics that were about to characterize the debate of the following years: the divorce between elites and the people; the need to re-integrate the Peronist masses; and the encounter between socialism and *nacionalismo*. The next three sections by Beatriz Sarlo -- "Cristianos en el siglo"; "Los universitarios" and "Historiadores, sociólogos, intelectuales" -- illustrate clearly what the author calls "the path from the reformist solutions to the revolutionary".³

In his first section, Sarlo describes the process that started with the growing sensitivity of the church toward social issues and led to the radicalization of great sectors of this institution, of which the most radical branches converged in the *Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo*. In his second section, "Los universitarios", the critic explains the paradoxical cycle that the university lived through in the years that followed the Liberating Revolution. At the same time that the university was creating laws of legitimization of a scientific practice interior to the scientific field itself -- such as the creation of research institutions like CONICET -- these laws were impugned based on discussion about "*el gran concepto político de la época, el desarrollo*," to which soon the students added that of imperial penetration. At the core of the former discussion was a debate about the social role of science in an underdeveloped country. For the students, the answer to that was easy: "science should be at the service of the 'masses' in a university that ought to be at the service of the 'masses' as well,"⁴ independent of foreign interests (this also included funding). In his final section, "Historiadores, sociólogos, intelectuales", Sarlo continues with the same logic, showing a cycle opened by Perón's fall and closed with the politicization and violence of the late sixties. In the narration, supported by the text chosen to illustrate it, the modernization of science in the period after 1955 is finally challenged by the demands of the current ideological radicalization, transforming the relationship between "*los letrados y la política*" into one in which politics reigned uncontested.

The capacity of the authors to reduce that world of "intellectual battles" into a set of topics that organizes the debate and the history of those years of turmoil is striking. The authors manage to give voice to a diverse group of actors without losing argumentative coherence. They describe a process in which the intellectual became totally subjugated to the exigencies of politics (the revolution) and in which intellectual discourse lost any specificity. At the same time, the authors are careful to register other discourses that in the sixties attempted to open up a space for reformist solutions such as Gino Germani's proposal of modernization of sociological studies. However, it is clear that the focus of the book is to show the hegemonic side of this history: that of "the revolutionaries." In this sense, the book does not provide a very comprehensive picture of those who did not worship the "Cuban party" -- an expression used by Silvia Sigal. What happened to the pre-1955 intellectual establishment during those years? Were they totally absent from the scene? Neither the preliminary study nor its corresponding anthology tells us what happened to previous hegemonic intellectuals like Jorge Luis Borges or Victoria Ocampo during those years: to some extent they were protagonists of the radicalization of the young generation, if we remember that the cycle toward radicalization began with the rejection of such older intellectual models.

This absence is related to another subject that the book does not cover: that of the years of the anti-Peronist consensus. Both the study and the anthology dedicate a marginal position to that decade. An eloquent sign of the lack of representation of those years -- more than a third of the period the book attempts to picture -- is the fact that only eleven of the sixty-eight texts of the anthology were produced before the coup of September 1955. Even Altamirano's part -- which proposes to show the debate opened by the Liberating Revolution -- starts only with the reactions produced by the coup; this partial coverage makes it difficult to appreciate in what way the discussion he portrays consists of the breakdown of a

previous consensus. The volume thus fails to illustrate the anti-Peronism that dominated the intellectual world for more than a decade previous to 1955. The reader wonders, without finding an answer in the text, why the letter of the Argentine writers in support of the Democratic Union is included in the political volume edited by Altamirano and not in the one dedicated to the intellectuals.⁵ This shows as well a certain discrepancy between the two volumes on Peronism: while in *La batalla de las ideas* the “social era” (as Altamirano denominates the period of Perón’s rule) occupies only a minor part of the study, in *Bajo el signo de la masas* it constitutes a central part of the study. However, this imbalance is not altogether meaningless. It illustrates that, if in sociological studies of Peronism (the most prolific until now) the interrogation that dominated was the topic of Perón’s social bases, in those dealing with intellectual history it focuses on the topic of the radicalization of young generations in the years that followed the end of Perón’s second presidency in 1955.

Notes

1. The only article that covers the transformations in the intellectual field is "Duelos intelectuales" in *Ibid*, p. 39 [Volver al texto](#).
2. Sarlo, *La batalla*, p. 13. [Volver al texto](#).
3. *Ibid*, p. 14. [Volver al texto](#).
4. *Ibid*, p. 72. [Volver al texto](#).
5. Altamirano, *Bajo el signo*, p. 182. [Volver al texto](#).