Shaped by the forces of transnational capitalism, the Argentine mass culture of the 1930s was deeply divisive. Competing against foreign products, both the tango and the domestic cinema achieved significant market share by combining the signifiers of modernity, including dance rhythms, jazz-inspired orchestration and instrumentation, and Hollywood editing techniques, with markers of authenticity, such as lunfardo, milonguitas, popular melodrama, and recognizable local settings. These gestures of authenticity gave domestic mass culture its populist cast and constructed its audience in opposition to the rich. Despite the many efforts described in the previous chapter, the radio and cinema generally failed to produce unifying national myths. The deep classism of Argentina’s mass cultural melodrama meant that the cinema and the radio continued to identify the nation with the poor and to attack the rich as selfish, hypocritical, and anti-national.

The rules of the mass cultural game changed radically in 1943. The military coup of that year inaugu-
rated a new period in which both the radio and the cinema came under the unprecedented scrutiny and influence of the state. The military government enacted laws aimed at censoring certain types of radio programs while promoting others and at protecting the domestic film industry from foreign competition. State intervention in mass culture would expand much further once Juan Perón assumed control of the country in 1946. The Peronist state effectively expropriated the country’s most important newspapers and radio stations, cultivated ties to celebrities, enforced systematic censorship and blacklists, and made extensive use of the radio and cinema for the diffusion of propaganda. Nevertheless, in this chapter I will argue that the heavy-handed state intervention of the Perón years did not push mass culture in new directions so much as it reinforced and deepened certain tendencies that were already present. In particular, the populist elements of Perón-era cinema and radio were all developed in the preceding years. They were the result not of a top-down propaganda campaign, but of competition in the mass cultural marketplace.

But the impact of the mass culture of the 1930s went far beyond the nation’s radios and movie theaters. In crucial ways, Peronism itself was built from mass cultural raw materials. In the short time between 1943 and 1946, Juan Perón forged a deep connection with the Argentine working class. The strength of this bond and the speed with which it emerged have long puzzled historians. In a now classic account, Daniel James stressed the “heretical” impact of Peronist discourse, which enabled Argentina’s long excluded and exploited workers to contest traditional hierarchies. Yet we have only a vague idea of the origins of this heretical language. James has suggested an answer by identifying the tropes of tango songs in Perón’s rhetoric use and, more recently, by suggesting that Perón’s ability to connect with working-class audiences might have owed something to his use of popular melodrama. In fact, from its beginnings Peronism’s debt to Argentine mass culture was profound. The language with which Perón appealed so powerfully to workers was essentially melodramatic; in its Manichean moralism, its attack on the greed and selfishness of the rich, and its tendency to depict the poor as the authentic Argentine pueblo, it bore the unmistakable traces of the movies, music, and radio programs of the 1930s.

In stressing this influence, I am not suggesting that mass culture led inevitably to Peronism. The cinema and radio of the 1930s had a dramatic
effect on popular consciousness, but this effect was multivalent and contradictory. Mass culture encouraged both working-class solidarity and the pursuit of individual upward mobility; it denounced the rich even as it encouraged conformism. Moreover, Perón could not merely select which elements of mass culture appealed to him and ignore the others. Contradictions were built into mass cultural discourses at every level. Any attempt to use these discourses politically would require substantial innovation. In the specific conjuncture opened up by the coup of 1943, Perón was able to appropriate elements that circulated in mass culture and refashion them into a powerful political rhetoric. These existing elements did not cause Peronism in any sense, but they did help determine the universe of the possible within the political arena of the 1940s. Moreover, Peronism’s debt to mass culture helps explain the movement’s appeal. Perón’s message resonated with the expectations and assumptions of workers who were longtime consumers of domestic radio programs and movies. Just as important, the mass cultural origins of Peronism help account for the movement’s deep contradictions. Peronism’s tendency to appeal simultaneously to both class envy and class pride and its oscillation between anti-elitism and conformism were inherited from mass culture. Even the movement’s profoundly polarizing impact is partly explained by its reliance on the divisive messages of the cinema and radio of the 1930s. In all of these ways, populism in Argentina was not merely a byproduct of industrialization or a reflection of labor politics; it was also the outcome of a particular pattern of mass cultural development.

THE ADVENT OF STATE INTERVENTION

On June 4, 1943, a group of nationalist army officers known as the GOU overthrew Ramón Castillo’s government. Tired of the corruption and electoral fraud that had kept conservative governments in power since 1930, these officers were alarmed by the increasing hostility of the United States, which sought to pressure Argentina into declaring war on the Axis. They believed that Argentina’s economic future and even its very independence required an aggressive, state-led program of industrialization. At the same time, they were concerned by what they saw as the growing influence of Communism, a threat they believed could only be countered by a powerful state committed to efficiently organizing society along corporatist lines. Over the next two years, Colonel Juan Perón, who
served as secretary of labor and vice president, would emerge as the most powerful figure within the military government. Perón embraced both industrialization as the path to economic independence and the corporatist notion of the state as the ultimate guarantor of social justice. But he combined those ideas with a frankly populist defense of the poor and a set of policies that channeled significant material benefits to the organized working class. By 1946 Perón had built a powerful working-class movement, won a presidential election, and accumulated vast quantities of political capital.4

For the film and radio industries, the advent of the military government and the rise of Peronism ushered in a new era characterized by unprecedented state intervention. To be sure, the governments of the 1930s had exerted influence on the mass media. The most glaring case, perhaps, was that of Natalio Botana’s popular newspaper, Crítica. After the coup that overthrew President Yrigoyen in 1930, the paper emerged as a vocal critic of the new military regime led by General José Félix Uriburu. The authorities responded by jailing Botana for three months and then pushing him into exile in Spain. In order to protect his newspaper, Botana transferred ownership of Crítica to General Agustín P. Justo, Uriburu’s principal rival for power. Publishing under the name Jornada, the newspaper now served as a mouthpiece for Justo’s presidential campaign. When Justo assumed the presidency in 1932, Botana returned to Buenos Aires and to his position at the helm of Crítica, but the paper did not regain its political independence. Crítica consistently backed Justo’s conservative political alliance, the Concordancia, and Justo himself actively influenced its coverage of politics.5 Yet notwithstanding the case of Crítica and others like it, state intervention in the media was limited in the 1930s. The vast majority of radio stations and film studios remained in private hands throughout the decade, and while these media were subject to meddlesome regulations and occasional censorship, they were never enlisted to serve an official propaganda campaign. Beginning with the coup in 1943, both film and radio would be the target of much more extensive government intervention. By the end of the decade, Perón had replaced Argentina’s vibrant capitalist culture industries with a vast media apparatus designed to serve the interests of the state.

In 1943 the Argentine film industry was in crisis. The onset of the Second World War had dramatically transformed the international playing field for Argentine film companies. By effectively closing markets in
continental Europe, where Hollywood had done more than a quarter of its business, the war encouraged the North American studios to look to Latin America with renewed interest. Although companies in the United States had long exported films south, since the mid-1930s Argentine filmmakers had steadily increased their share of both the domestic and the Latin American markets. In the early 1940s, Paramount’s Buenos Aires office repeatedly complained that Argentine movies posed a threat to sales throughout the region. The Hollywood studios now hoped that the United States government would help them reconquer the Latin American market. At the same time, political considerations also motivated Hollywood to refocus on Latin America. As the global conflict escalated, the U.S. State Department created the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), under the direction of Nelson Rockefeller, in order to counter Axis propaganda in Latin America. Through its Motion Pictures Division, the OCIAA used the cinema as a key component of its efforts to inculcate pro-Allied sentiment. In addition to distributing hundreds of newsreels, the agency encouraged the Hollywood studios to make films with sympathetic Latin American characters and themes and promoted these films abroad.

For American policymakers interested in winning an ideological war against Fascism, the success of Argentine films throughout Latin America was troubling. Under President Castillo, Argentina had committed itself to a policy of neutrality in the war. Although some right-wing nationalists were actively pro-Nazi, the nation’s reluctance to join the Allied war effort had other causes. The Smoot-Hawley Act of 1930 increased the already high tariffs that the United States maintained against Argentine imports, generating a strong current of anti-Americanism. This sentiment gained strength after the Lend-Lease Act of 1941, under which the United States began to supply arms to loyal allies, including Argentina’s regional rival, Brazil. Meanwhile, at least until Pearl Harbor, Argentina’s stance was actively supported by the British, who relied on the import of Argentine foodstuffs. British policymakers recognized that if Argentina abandoned its neutrality, Germany would seek to impede this transatlantic trade. In any case, Argentina’s refusal to join the Pan-American alliance and to declare war on the Axis fed United States suspicions about the rise of South American Fascism. Argentina’s occasional censorship of Hollywood films at the request of Germany and Spain seemed to justify these concerns, and the OCIAA feared that pro-Axis propaganda might
find its way into the Argentine movies that were so popular throughout Latin America. In response, the agency embarked on a concerted effort to weaken the Argentine film industry’s position in Latin America while promoting films made in more reliably pro-Allied Mexico. As Variety put it in 1943, “Terrific U.S. pressure is being exerted to eliminate Argentina as the world’s greatest producer of Spanish language films, and elevate Mexico into the spot.”

Political and commercial considerations were mutually reinforcing. Since the 1930s, significant United States investment had flowed into Mexican film studios and theater chains. Most famously, RKO joined with the Mexican entrepreneur Emilio Azcárraga to found Churubusco Studio, destined to become Latin America’s most important film company in the postwar period. North American investors stood to gain if Mexico replaced Argentina as the dominant supplier of commercial films to the Latin American market.

In this effort, the OCLA had a potent lever at its disposal. Even as United States investment, loans, equipment, and technical assistance flowed into the Mexican film industry during the war, Washington imposed severe limits on the amount of raw film stock that could be exported to Argentina. Beginning in 1940, Argentine film studios began to experience shortages; in 1943 the United States imposed a formal quota that represented only one-sixth of what the industry required in order to continue to function at its past level. While Mexico enjoyed unlimited imports of raw film, Argentine filmmakers were forced to purchase expensive black market film stock from Brazil and Chile. The results were dramatic. In 1942, Argentine companies released a record 56 films, while the Mexican film industry produced 49; the following year, Argentina produced only 36 films, while Mexico’s production soared to 67. The numbers for 1944 and 1945 revealed a dramatic transformation: 157 films were produced in Mexico during those years compared to only 47 in Argentina. By the end of the war, Mexico had definitively replaced Argentina as the dominant producer of Spanish-language cinema for the Latin American market.

While the policy of the United States triggered the rapid decline in the fortunes of the Argentine film industry, other factors were also at work. Compared to its Mexican counterpart, the Argentine film industry was highly inefficient. On the level of production, Argentine companies imitated their Hollywood counterparts by keeping actors and technical workers under contract even when they were not filming. By the end of
the 1930s, the studios had to pay steep salaries in order to maintain their exclusive deals with the top talent. Argentina’s film distribution system was similarly problematic. Having never managed to secure a percentage of the gross from theater owners, the studios sold their films on a flat-fee basis both in Argentina and throughout Latin America. Domestic exhibitors paid such low prices that Argentina had the longest running film programs in the world: for one inexpensive ticket, a moviegoer could watch four or five features. As a result, the film companies remained chronically undercapitalized. And given the instability and low profit margins that characterized the business, Argentine banks generally refused to provide credit. Even before the OCIAA launched its policy of preferential treatment for the Mexican film industry, Mexican producers had surmounted many of these problems thanks to the active intervention of the state. The Mexican authorities embraced a protectionist policy toward the domestic film industry during the Cárdenas administration (1934–40), a full decade before their counterparts in Argentina. In addition to significant tax exemptions, Mexican filmmakers received 70 percent of their operating budgets in the form of loans from a state institution designed to foment growth in the industry. Likewise, they distributed their films through centralized state agencies, which actively promoted their films abroad and negotiated favorable terms. Argentine filmmakers recognized that in order to compete, they would require the assistance of the state, and in 1940 the Association of Argentine Film Producers requested the suppression of import taxes on raw film and equipment, state bank loans, and a series of other protectionist measures. The request was ignored.∞≤

By bringing to power a nationalist government that rejected liberal economic orthodoxy, the military coup of 1943 finally created the conditions for state protection of the Argentine film industry.∞≥ Confronting the shortage of raw film stock, the studios sought to negotiate better terms from domestic theater chains, and when that effort failed, the conflict was turned over to Perón’s Secretariat of Labor and Welfare. Perón responded with a studio-friendly decree establishing a percentage rental system as well as a quota of Argentine films that theaters were required to show. In slightly modified form, this decree would shape the film industry after Perón’s election in 1946: a law enacted in 1947 required that domestic films account for 25 percent of screen time in first-run porteño theaters and 40 percent in the rest of the country. At the same time, the Banco de Crédito Industrial began to offer financing to domes-
tic film producers, and film producers were also granted a substantial subsidy generated by a small fee added to ticket prices. Although these measures failed to restore international sales, they did revive film production levels; in 1950 the industry released fifty-six films, finally matching the high it had achieved in 1942. Aggressive state intervention also had a significant effect on the nature of the films produced. Low levels of capitalization combined with the quirks of Argentina’s protectionist apparatus encouraged the production of inexpensive films, which stood to receive a greater portion of their financing from the subsidy and which would be guaranteed screen time regardless of their quality. The Peronist government also actively sought to moralize and nationalize the domestic cinema. In addition to direct censorship, the regime used various measures to achieve these aims. While films deemed to be “of national interest” enjoyed preferential access to government credit, the government also centralized the allocation of raw film stock, emulating the OCIAA by doling the material out to producers it favored. By 1949, with the designation of Raúl Alejandro Apold, the former press chief for Argentina Sono Film, as undersecretary of information and press, the regime had created a film industry in which every artistic decision was subject to political control.∞∂

Argentine radio entrepreneurs never confronted the sort of crisis faced by their counterparts in cinema. With no foreign competitors and free of any crippling dependence on imported raw materials, radio stations hardly needed the protection of the state. And yet, calls for state intervention were frequent. Many observers felt that the poor quality of radio programming combined with its powerful influence over the masses required state intervention. In the late 1930s, the campaign to “nationalize” the radio gained many adherents who worried about the spread of vulgarity and hoped that radio would promote “the spiritual elevation of the mass of workers and humble people.”∞∑ And the government seemed to agree; a report produced by the Ortiz administration’s Commission for the Study and Reorganization of the Radio System in 1939 proposed significant state oversight. Nevertheless, faced with the resistance of broadcasters, the government failed to act on the proposal. Argentine radio, like the nation’s film industry, would experience aggressive state intervention only after the coup in 1943 and particularly after the rise of the Perón regime.

The military government’s approach to the radio was strongly in-
fluenced by the Catholic Church, and particularly by Monsignor Gustavo Franceschi, who sought to moralize and protect Argentine youth by shielding them from the corrupt influence of the tango and teaching them to speak proper Spanish. Within days of assuming power, the government issued a decree against the use of slang on the radio, a measure wholeheartedly endorsed by *La Nación* and other conservative proponents of the effort to clean up mass culture. Over the next three years, the military government decreed that radio stations must be Argentine owned, must provide time for Argentine folk music, and must limit the transmission of radio novelas. Just months before Perón assumed the presidency, the government released a complete set of radio regulations intended to replace the rules put in place in 1933. These enshrined the state’s role as that of a “moral guardian” charged with overseeing the contents of radio programs and countering the influence of commercial interests. The new rules dictated that if a network broadcast multiple works of radio theater, at least one must “be related to Argentine history or tradition.” No radio novela could be set in a place frequented by criminals or feature prostitutes or alcoholics. Moreover, the rules prohibited certain comic affectations on the radio, including nasal timbres, “effeminate distortions,” or exaggerated shouting. Perhaps most onerous, stations were now required to present a written copy of every work of radio theater, every song, and every advertisement to the Direcccion General de Radiodifusión several days before broadcast. This agency would then cut or correct the scripts and lyrics as it saw fit.16

The Perón regime maintained this system of censorship essentially unchanged, while dramatically expanding the role of the state in the radio industry. Using its ownership of the airwaves as the ultimate form of leverage, the government pressured station owners to sell their licenses. In July 1947, the transmission of a Perón speech on Radio Belgrano was interrupted by a voice saying “don’t believe anything he says; it is all lies.” The regime responded by shutting down the station until owner Jaime Yankelevich agreed to sell; in exchange, Eva Perón appointed Yankelevich station administrator. By harassing other station owners with frequent inspections and onerous broadcasting demands, the government forced them to follow suit. By the end of the year, Argentina’s vast commercial radio industry had been replaced by two state-owned networks: one built around Yankelevich’s network and the other around that of his former competitor, Radio El Mundo.17 At the same time, the Perón regime used
an international newsprint shortage to force the country’s major newspapers to sell to its allies. By 1951, when La Prensa, the last holdout, was forced to sell, the government had silenced its opposition and assembled a massive official media apparatus under the direction of two agencies: the private holding company Editorial ALEA, run by Perón’s personal secretary Carlos Vicente Aloé, which owned the official newspaper chain as well as the El Mundo radio network, and the Undersecretariat of Information and the Press, under the direction of Apold. In a few short years, Argentina’s commercial mass media had disappeared, replaced by a lavishly funded propaganda machine.\textsuperscript{16}

RUPTURE AND CONTINUITY: MASS CULTURE UNDER PERÓN

The advent of extensive state intervention in the mass media had a dramatic effect on the lives and creative output of Argentina’s musicians, actors, and other popular artists. Lyricists, musicians, playwrights, screenwriters, directors, and radio programmers had to accommodate themselves to the machinery of censorship imposed by the military government and maintained by the Perón regime. The creation of cultural products remained in the hands of independent artists seeking to attract an audience in the commercial marketplace, but these products were now subject to the scrutiny of moralistic and often quite capricious bureaucrats. Among their earliest targets were works that featured lunfardo or slang. The military government banned Niní Marshall’s characters Cándida and Catita from the radio for their incorrect Spanish and changed the title and chorus of Discépolo’s tango “Yira . . . yira,” a lunfardo phrase referring to the aimless walk of a prostitute, to the ridiculously proper “Da vuelta . . . da vuelta.” Yet vocabulary was hardly the only issue. Discépolo’s “Uno,” whose finely wrought poetry was far removed from lunfardo, was one of many tangos banned in 1944, perhaps for its profoundly melancholy mood.\textsuperscript{19} Arbitrary censorship persisted under Peronism. In 1949 Apold’s staff cleaned up Discépolo’s “Cafetín de Buenos Aires,” eliminating its use of the slang vieja for mother and ameliorating the song’s pessimism.\textsuperscript{20} According to screenwriter Ulyses Petit de Murat, the authorities intervened in the filming of Suburbio (Klimovsky, 1951) to insist that the Peronist actress Fanny Navarro be allowed to wear the latest French fashions, despite the humble origins of the character she
was playing. More significantly, portions of the movie were refilmed in response to Apold’s 1950 decree that any film that did not “reflect the elevated cultural state . . . of the Argentine people” would not benefit from the nation’s protectionist laws.

Even more onerous than censorship were the blacklists that began to circulate as early as October 1946, denying work on the radio, the stage, or the movie set to artists whose loyalty to the regime was suspect. Once again, this punishment was applied capriciously: the lists included both outspoken anti-Peronists and those who may have personally offended Eva Perón or some other high-ranking official. Many of those victimized responded by leaving the country. Most famously, Libertad Lamarque, blacklisted after feuding with the future first lady during the filming of *La cabalgata del circo* (Soffici, 1945), resumed her film career in Mexico. She was joined there by many Argentines, including Niní Marshall, who had returned to the radio and cinema with the rise of Peronism but whose contract with Sono Film was cancelled in 1950 when she was accused of caricaturing Evita (as the first lady was known) in private. Among the many others who left Argentina were the directors Luis Saslavsky, Carlos Hugo Christensen, and Alberto de Zavalía and the actors Paulina Singerman, Delia Gárces, and Francisco Petrone. Several others managed to reconcile themselves with the regime. The jazz singer Blackie, for example, had been blacklisted for her public defense of Socialist political prisoners in 1945, but she was allowed to return to the radio after Fanny Navarro spoke to Evita on her behalf. After Evita died in 1952, artists were subject to the personal whims of Apold, with occasionally perverse results. While Marshall, Singerman, Gárces, and others were allowed to return, Hugo del Carril and Fanny Navarro, both fervent Peronists, found themselves blacklisted.

This dramatic transformation in the conditions of mass cultural production undoubtedly affected the content of movies and radio programs. The silencing of dozens of the nation’s most important artists and the imposition of official oversight and censorship strongly encouraged cultural producers to police themselves, ensuring that they avoided any contradiction with the “New Argentina” under construction. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that this was not a “cultural revolution” in which a fully formed official ideology was imposed from the top down. Notwithstanding the many artists who were blacklisted, the Perón regime sought to work with the existing mass cultural industries. The
government produced many propaganda films and broadcast its own version of the news on the radio, but the majority of what was heard on radios and seen on movie screens in the Perón era was commercial entertainment aimed at attracting advertisers and ticket-buyers. Eva Perón’s career as a radio and film actress gave the regime a wealth of contacts in the entertainment world, which it sought to use to its advantage. Apold himself was a man drawn not from the ranks of nationalist intellectuals but from the film industry. Similarly, Evita’s own speechwriter, Francisco Muñoz Azpiri, had written scripts for her during her time on Radio Belgrano. While some artists—del Carril, Navarro, Tita Merello, Discépolo, Homero Manzi—were well-known Peronists, many others—Luis César Amadori, Manuel Romero—were happy to work with the regime. Still others, like the director Lucas Demare, kept their anti-Peronism a secret while continuing to work productively and relatively autonomously. As a result, the subordination of the film and the radio industries to the state had a rather subtle effect, reinforcing certain tendencies that already existed while suppressing others.

Since Domingo Di Núbila published his pioneering history of Argentine cinema in 1959, scholars have tended to view the Perón era as a period of artistic decline for the local film industry. Weakened by the impact of United States foreign policy and then, especially, by the government’s heavy-handed interventions, the Argentine studios allegedly abandoned their popular roots, producing “banal” and “anodyne” movies. According to this view, even as Peronism empowered the nation’s workers, middle-class filmmakers turned their backs on the social realism of Ferreyra and Soffici. Di Núbila’s periodization, which marked 1942 as the end of the “golden era” in Argentine cinema, was likely shaped by the views of the many actors and filmmakers who suffered personally under Peronism. For Petit de Murat, for example, the Perón era was defined by the regime’s “contempt (menosprecio)” for artistic expression. An examination of the cinema of these years, however, reveals a great deal of continuity with the earlier period. Many of the trends that critics have associated with the Perón era were visible well before 1945: the rise of white telephone films and of light comedies featuring young ingénues, the heavy reliance on melodrama, the fantasy of class reconciliation, the tendency to avoid depictions of the urban working class. By putting more money in workers’ pockets, Perón’s policies led to a dramatic increase in the size of the Argentine movie audience: in 1952 Buenos Aires cinemas
registered an average monthly audience of nearly five million, a threefold increase over the combined theater and cinema audience of 1940.28 But what these audiences saw on the screen did not represent a dramatic change from what they had seen before. Claudio España and Ricardo Manetti have argued that Peronism did not invent new cinematic forms: “It appropriated existing models without managing to produce forms of representation suited to the popular masses that had supported the political structure.”29 Yet Peronism’s reliance on existing cinematic models made perfect sense. These models both reflected the popular aesthetic preferences forged in the previous decade and offered messages that were quite compatible with the regime’s populist discourse.

The Perón-era films of Luis César Amadori, who allegedly used his ties to Apold in order to keep Argentina Sono Film in the government’s good graces, reveal the essential continuity with the cinema of the previous period. Amadori enjoyed probably the biggest hit of his career with Dios se lo pague (1948), a melodramatic adaptation of a comic play by the Brazilian writer Joracy Camargo. The film tells the story of Mario Alvarez, a millionaire by day and a beggar by night. By begging, Alvarez hopes to acquire enough wealth to ruin his former bosses, who cheated him when he was a simple manual laborer. In the end, he and his lover, a high-class woman of the night, are redeemed when they realize that “one must not be ambitious, one must give what one has.”30 Two years later, Amadori enjoyed another commercial success with Nacha Regules, another melodrama featuring the same stars as Dios se lo pague: the Mexican Arturo de Córdova and the Argentine actress Zully Moreno, who was married to the director. Based on the famous novel published in 1919 by the conservative nationalist Manuel Gálvez, Nacha Regules narrated the quest of a wealthy aristocrat to reform a prostitute despite the hostility of his upper-class friends who disdain the poor. The couple are united and morally redeemed at the end of the film, although condemned to a life of poverty. The film critic Néstor (Miguel Paulino Tato) would later attack Amadori for putting Peronist lines in the mouths of Nacha Regules and other characters, and, in fact, the focus on social justice in these movies did seem to echo Peronist rhetoric.31 Yet Amadori’s depiction of the evil, exploitative rich and the noble and long-suffering poor hardly represented a departure from the rules of 1930s melodrama. Likewise, the warning against the moral dangers implicit in upward mobility and in wealth more generally had ample precedent.
From the Manichean worldview long typical of Argentine popular melodrama, it was a small step to ostensibly Peronist messages. In Manuel Romero’s *Navidad de los pobres* (1947), a young capitalist rejects his father’s exploitative attitude and recognizes the importance of raising wages and improving work conditions for his employees. The wealthy son falls in love with an impoverished, single mother, suggesting the possibility of class reconciliation. The pressures of state intervention are obvious here—in one scene, Niní Marshall’s Catita borrows Eva Perón’s preferred insult when she denounces “oligarchs” but the film covers much of the same thematic ground as Romero’s earlier films. Juan Perón’s vision of a society characterized by class harmony was reflected on movie screens, but this was not much of an innovation. Both before and after 1945, rich characters had to reject hypocrisy and greed in order to achieve moral redemption and make interclass romance possible.

As Clara Kriger has argued, Perón-era films could depict social injustice so long as they made it clear that these problems occurred in the past. For example, when the protagonist of *Dios se lo pague* describes his life as an exploited worker, he clarifies that this mistreatment occurred “when labor protection laws had not yet been invented.” The era’s most enduring work of social critique was the Peronist Hugo del Carril’s *Las aguas bajan turbias* (1951), which revisited the world of exploited *yerba mate* workers first explored in Soffici’s *Prisioneros de la tierra*. But unlike the earlier film, del Carril’s movie situates the workers’ suffering in a pre-modern past, while holding out the promise of a better future. The movie makes this point explicit with its opening statement: “The river is today a path of civilization and progress. But it has not always been this way.” The couple at the center of the film rejects the backward family model characteristic of the pre-modern world of the yerba workers, in which authoritarian husbands punish their wives for being raped by foremen. At the end, they go off to find a better life in the urban south where, they have heard, workers are unionized and enjoy better treatment. In its use of an anonymous hero to tell a story of social injustice, del Carril’s film had more in common with Italian neo-realism than with the tradition of Argentine criollismo that shaped Soffici’s work. His protagonist is not a violent rebel like Podeley, the hero of *Prisioneros de la tierra*; instead he is a model worker and supportive husband ready to leave the unjust world of the past and join the utopian modernity being built in the south.
If the advent of Peronism meant that social critiques had to be aimed at the past, it also brought subtle but meaningful changes to film melodrama, which continued to be the dominant genre in domestic cinema. Kriger argues that Perón-era melodramas featured new roles for women. These roles did not break completely with the past: a woman’s happiness was still explicitly linked to the home and the family. Yet for many of the melodramatic heroines of this period, “virginity has ceased to be the only good they possess and the virtue that guarantees their happiness."\[^{35}\] Unlike the passive victims of the past, these characters are strong women who take charge of their own lives. Among the most iconic female stars of the Perón era was Tita Merello, who typically played a humble woman from a poor neighborhood who refuses to submit to male authority (see figure 12). Her characters do not transgress traditional gender roles—they are often hyper-protective mothers—but they do stand up to alcoholic, profligate, or abusive husbands. Moreover, in her successful career as a tango singer, Merello created a distinctive persona that did upend gender expectations. Her low voice and habit of combining singing with talking evoked a more masculine tango style. Even more unusual, she described herself as ugly, thereby explicitly rejecting the stratagem of the milonguita who gets ahead by virtue of attracting men.\[^{36}\] Merello’s signature song, “Se dice de mí,” a milonga she performed in the film *Mercado de abasto* (Demare, 1955) is a catalogue of masculine bravado:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Se dice que soy fiera} \\
\text{Que camino a lo malevo} \\
\text{Que soy chueca y que me muevo} \\
\text{Con un aire compadrón} \\
\ldots \\
\text{Si fea soy, pongámosle,} \\
\text{Que de eso aún no me enteré} \\
\text{En el amor yo solo sé} \\
\text{Que a más de un gil, dejé a pie}
\end{align*}
\]

*They say I’m ugly*  
*That I walk like a bad guy*  
*That I’m lame and that I move*  
*With a tough guy’s attitude.*  
\[\ldots\]
If I’m ugly, let’s assume it,
I haven’t noticed.
When it comes to love I only know
That I have dumped more than one sucker.

Merello’s assertiveness certainly resonated with Peronism’s tendency to promote a new, public role for women even as it reinforced traditional notions of feminine domesticity. But her persona also drew heavily on earlier mass culture. The working-class pride asserted by Merello’s characters is very much in the tradition created by such stars as Carlos Gardel, Luis Sandrini, and Niní Marshall, even if she tended to express that pride more cynically.

Like the cinema, the Argentine radio evolved under Peronism, but without any radical rupture in the content of programming. Despite the heavy censorship of the military government and the forced takeover by the Perón regime, radio stations continued to feature many of the same sorts of programs as they had before. As in the case of the film industry, many of the trends audible on the radio during the Perón years originated in the 1930s. Whereas in 1933, musical programs represented some 62 percent of the offerings on Argentine radio, this proportion had dropped to 42 percent by 1941, with radio theater and, to a lesser extent, news programming taking up the slack. The trend continued over the next few years: in 1946 music, radio theater, and news represented 40 percent, 21 percent, and 15 percent. The continuation of trends was visible within these program categories as well. Beginning in the late 1930s, criollista programs modeled on Chispazos de Tradición became somewhat less common, perhaps in part because programs built around gaucho orators like Fernando Ochoa offered a more “authentic” alternative. Yet episodic gaucho dramas retained their appeal well into the Perón period. Alongside the gauchesque, crime stories and romances steadily gained popularity. By the early 1940s, new types of radio novelas emerged, including a growing number of melodramas set in unspecified foreign locales, as well as several adaptations of Hollywood films. Argentine radio-theater companies produced versions of both Wuthering Heights (Wyler, 1939) and Dark Victory (Goulding, 1939). Perhaps the most innovative radio novela of the Perón period was Los Pérez García, which ran on Radio El Mundo throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and into the 1960s. While romantic radio novelas continued to feature love stories between the rich and poor, Los
Pérez García inaugurated a new type of program focused on the daily life of a “model” middle-class family, led by a father who served as breadwinner and a mother who attended to the needs of her spouse and children. According to its writer, the program carefully avoided all social conflict, depicting a world in which “there is always a means of solving problems” and thereby offering listeners a “comforting spiritual rest.”

This approach may have held special appeal for a middle class that felt
besieged by Peronism’s tendency to empower those beneath them on the social hierarchy. Yet Los Pérez García started its run before Juan Perón began his. The advent of this new middle-class entertainment was not primarily a result of political developments.

Within the field of popular music, the Perón government put the power of the state behind the genre of rural folk music. Official sponsorship of the music began in 1943, when the first radio regulations passed by the military government required that stations broadcast folk music performances. Perón not only extended these requirements, but he also subsidized the academic study of Argentina’s folk traditions, featured folk performers prominently in festivals and mass rallies, and mandated that school curricula include the music. Alongside these official developments, folk music and dance became steadily more popular. With the growth of peñas folklóricas, both commercial and non-profit venues for listening and dancing to folk music, porteños of all social classes and political affiliations participated in the vogue for the music of the Argentine interior. Since the late 1910s, the commercial potential of folk music had lagged behind that of tango, but this situation began to change in the late 1940s with the emergence of the folksinger Antonio Tormo. Tormo’s single, “El rancho ’e la Cambicha” (1950) quickly became the best-selling Argentine record to date. Released at a time when the Argentine population numbered only sixteen million, the record allegedly sold some five million copies.\(^2\)

Although the policies of the Perón government clearly helped expand the popularity of folk music, the commercial viability of the genre was not primarily the result of official sponsorship, nor did it represent a radical break with recent trends. As I have described, folk music had steadily gained prominence on the radio during the late 1930s as part of a larger trend toward nationalist depictions of the countryside. Matallana’s statistics confirm that folk music became a significant component of radio programming before the advent of state intervention. Having accounted for 6 percent of musical programs in 1936, the genre more than doubled its share to 13 percent by 1941, two years before the military coup and the first of the new radio regulations.\(^3\) These numbers suggest that the rise of folk music responded to commercial prerogatives more than to the dictates of the state. “El rancho ’e la Cambicha” was very much a product of these market trends. Tormo had performed on the radio since the late 1930s as a member of Buenaventura Luna’s Tropilla de Huachi-
Pampa. As a professional musician embarking on a solo career, Tormo was interested in selling records, not advancing a nationalist intellectual program. His performance of “El rancho ’e la Cambicha” was hardly an exercise in authenticity. The song was a rasgado doble, a version of the chamamé rhythm particular to northeastern Argentina, but Tormo, like the rest of Luna’s group, was from the distant Andean province of San Juan. The idea that he should record a chamamé, a rhythm that he had never performed before, came from his recording company, RCA Victor.

The rise of commercial folk music in the 1940s and 1950s partly reflected the vast internal migration of those years. For the thousands of rural Argentines who had moved to Buenos Aires in pursuit of jobs in the growing industrial sector, the music of artists like Tormo may have been a welcome reminder of home. Tormo was vilified by middle-class porteños precisely because they saw him as the musical representative of the hordes of Peronist cabecitas negras invading their city. And this was an association that Tormo himself accepted, describing himself years later as “the mouthpiece of the cabecitas.” Nevertheless, as Oscar Chamosa has argued, Tormo’s huge sales figures indicate that his popularity, and that of folk music more generally, extended beyond the internal migrants. As Natalia Milanesio has shown, the insult cabecita negra became synonymous with “Peronist,” blurring ethnic and class-based identities. While the term explicitly invoked the migrants’ mestizo features—their dark hair and skin color—it came to signify class and political affiliation as well. Given the existence of folk music peñas for the middle and upper classes, anti-Peronist scorn for Tormo was more an expression of hostility to the working class than a rejection of the cultural practices of the countryside. In any case, for most of Tormo’s fans, his music was not part of their cultural patrimony. Outside of the northeastern provinces of Santiago del Estero, Entre Ríos, and Corrientes, most Argentines, whether they lived in urban or rural settings, would likely only have heard a chamamé on the radio. As a professional radio performer, Tormo differed from earlier artists like Andrés Chazarreta, who collected and disseminated “authentic” folk music to connoisseurs. Tormo’s music was aimed at as broad an audience as possible. Toward that end, he played simple, accessible rhythms, and incorporated lyrics that resonated with Argentine popular culture. Several of his hits, for example, included melodramatic lyrics that described social inequalities in ways that would have been familiar to Argentine film audiences. The lyrics of “El rancho ’e la
Cambicha,” although peppered with Guarani words and phrases typical of the northeast, also sought to connect the song with a musical form to which urban audiences would have been more accustomed: “I’ll dance a tango-ized chamamé in little steps / a milonga-ized chamamé in Uruguayan style / slowly trotting as they dance it in Entre Ríos.”

Through these references to tango and milonga, the lyrics introduced a novel musical form to a diverse Argentine audience.

According to some scholars, the rise of folk music during the Perón years coincided with the decline of the tango. Blas Matamoro argues that tango lost its creative spark because its largely middle-class creators felt alienated from Peronism and were therefore unable to create a tango style appropriate to the New Argentina. For Pablo Vila, tango lost popularity because it did not speak as effectively as folk music to the internal migrants who supported Perón. These explanations may contain elements of truth, but they exaggerate the extent to which Peronism forced a radical rupture in the history of Argentine popular music. The first years of Peronism were hardly a moment of crisis for tango; if anything, the new regime’s policies produced a tango boom. As populists, the Peróns embraced the culture of the masses whenever possible, and tango was no exception. The regime lifted the military government’s prohibition on lunfardo, cultivated the support of prominent tango stars, recruited tango bands to play at public events, and even created a national prize for the tango to be awarded every year on October 17, Peronism’s most important holiday. More important, the dramatic rise in working-class living standards produced by Peronist policies, as well as the regime’s sponsorship of myriad opportunities for popular recreation, produced an explosion in popular dance. The milonga renaissance and the rise of Juan D’Arienzo’s band had already sparked a dance revival in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Peronism reinforced the trend. Cabarets thrived downtown and in every barrio, while sports and social clubs throughout the city turned their meeting spaces and soccer fields into tango dance floors on a nightly basis. The neighborhood of Villa Crespo alone had at least seven social clubs that regularly featured tango bands. In addition to D’Arienzo, dozens of bandleaders enjoyed success, including Aníbal Troilo, Carlos Di Sarli, Osvaldo Pugliese, Horacio Salgán, Pedro Laurenz, and Miguel Caló, just to name a handful of the best known. Beyond the dance floor, tango continued to find space on the radio and, as Tita Merello’s career indicates, on the screen. As the singer Edmundo
Rivero recalled of the late 1940s, “Everywhere the king was the tango. Even when it occasionally shared the stage with bands of other genres, these could not come close to it in audience or applause.”

Although some artists connected to the tango world found their way onto Peronist blacklists and many others resented the regime’s perceived assault on their own middle-class interests, many of tango’s pre-eminent artists and poets embraced Peronism. In addition to Hugo del Carril, who recorded the definitive version of the “Marcha peronista,” the movement’s famous fight song, the tango bandleader Francisco Lomuto was an outspoken Peronist. But the tango performer who seemed to fit Peronism best was singing star Alberto Castillo, probably the most successful tango singer of the 1940s and 1950s. Although he was a physician from a middle-class family, Castillo cultivated a populist persona. The lyrics to his hit “Así se baila el tango” (1942) were peppered with lunfardo and proudly insisted on the genre’s connections to the poor: “¿Qué saben los pitucos, lamidos y shushetas, qué saben lo que es tango, qué saben de compás? (What do rich boys and fops know, what do they know about tango, what do they know about rhythm?).” On stage, Castillo punctuated this line by throwing punches like a boxer, celebrating the aggressive masculinity of his popular audience, and symbolically knocking out the rich. The song’s commercial success, which preceded the rise of Perón, highlighted the classism implicit in the tango’s plebeian associations. Later, Castillo performed in the gaudy ties and wide lapels of a divito, proudly embracing a déclassé sartorial style associated with Perón’s followers. Since according to some accounts, many of those who dressed as divitos were internal migrants, Castillo’s populist persona likely appealed across ethnic lines. By drawing on tango’s long-standing pride in its popular origins, Castillo demonstrated that the genre was perfectly compatible with the class message of Peronism.

During the Perón era, Alberto Castillo became a deeply polarizing figure within the tango world, revealing a growing class division in Argentina’s mass cultural audience. The radio journalist Jorge Conti, who was a young boy in the 1940s, remembered scandalizing his mother by imitating Castillo’s wardrobe and singing style. As Conti later realized, Castillo’s outfits and mannerisms, as well as the lyrics of many of his biggest hits, represented a deliberate rejection of “good manners,” a “snide provocation” to “sanctimonious” conservatives. In this way, the singer inspired a revival of the sort of moral outrage that tango had provoked at the turn
of the twentieth century. For the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, Castillo was symptomatic of the immorality and impertinence that had taken hold of Buenos Aires under Perón. In a piece written two years after his decision to leave Peronist Argentina for France, Cortázar attacked Castillo for ruining the tango of Carlos Gardel: “The simple delight in bad taste and in resentful meanness (canallería resentida) explains the triumph of Alberto Castillo.” Like Antonio Tormo, Castillo became a symbol of the Peronist masses and an object of scorn for the anti-Peronist middle class.

Argentine mass culture had long attracted a multiclass audience, even if consumers of different backgrounds enjoyed the same products for different reasons. We have seen, for example, how some fans of Niní Marshall’s Catita enjoyed laughing at one of their social inferiors while others saw the character as a vindication of their own class position. In the 1940s, these two audiences were beginning to develop distinct preferences. Some tango bands, like D’Arienzo’s and Castillo’s, appealed primarily to working-class audiences while others had a more middle-class following. The Villa Malcolm Club of Villa Crespo, whose members were primarily white-collar employees and professionals, hosted both kinds of bands. But the club’s leaders imposed a strict dress code and rules banning lasciviousness on the dance floor. When one band’s fans behaved inappropriately, the club rescinded its contract. The rise of Peronism facilitated a tango boom, but it also lent political significance to the populist performance of artists like Alberto Castillo. In so doing, it encouraged a deepening middle-class anxiety about the cultural practices of the poor.

Peronism did not transform the tango. Just as the regime did with cinema, it appropriated existing models, encouraged certain tendencies, and added minor bits of rhetoric. Apold’s office censored tangos deemed incompatible with the New Argentina, but neither the government nor its allies created a Peronist tango per se. The tango bands that thrived in the 1940s drew heavily on the existing repertoire, including the tangos of Discépolo and Manzi, the “golden era” songs of Flores, Cadícamo, and Contursi, as well as the Old Guard classics of Villoldo and others. Most tangos written during the Perón years avoided any explicitly Peronist message. Perhaps the most enduring masterpiece of the period was Manzi’s “Sur” (1948), set to music by the legendary bandoneonist and bandleader Aníbal Troilo. In Manzi’s characteristic poetry, the song offers
a wistful portrait of the romantic, tango-esque neighborhoods of the southern part of Buenos Aires:

La esquina del herrero, barro y pampa,
tu casa, tu vereda y el zanjón,
y un perfume de yuyos y de alfalfa
que me llena de nuevo el corazón.

Nostalgias de las cosas que han pasado,
arena que la vida se llevó,
pesadumbre de barrios que han cambiado
y amargura del sueño que murió.

The blacksmith’s corner, mud and pampa,
your house, your sidewalk, and the ravine,
and a scent of weeds and alfalfa
that fills my heart all over again.

Nostalgias for things that have past,
sand that life swept away,
sorrow for barrios that have changed,
and bitterness for a dream that died.

Manzi’s evocation of old neighborhoods that seem to exist in a borderland between urban and rural space echoes the nostalgia and the hostility to modernization that characterized his earlier works like “Barrio de tango” and “Milonga del 900.” Manzi embraced the Perón regime, arguing that its commitment to nationalism and social justice represented the historical fulfillment of Hipólito Yrigoyen’s vision. Yet his enthusiasm for the New Argentina did not have a discernible impact on his lyrics, which continued to express a powerful longing for the past. Similarly, Cátulo Castillo and Enrique Santos Discépolo, who along with Manzi were among the most prominent tango lyricists of the period, were also outspoken Peronists, yet neither allowed Peronist ideology to shape their tangos.

The case of Discépolo is particularly interesting because it reveals the tango’s imperviousness to Peronist ideology. Despite his irritation at Apold’s censorship and his awareness of the limits that the regime had imposed on the freedom of expression, Discépolo was moved by the
sincere concern for social justice that seemed to motivate Juan and Eva Perón. When the regime asked for his help during the months leading up to the presidential elections of 1951, Discépolo agreed. Between July and November, he delivered extremely effective propaganda in the form of a regular radio show called "I think . . . and I say what I think!" That Discépolo expressed his support for the government in a monologue rather than a tango lyric reflected his sense that tango’s nostalgia as well as its internal contradictions made it unsuitable as Peronist propaganda. As he told his imaginary anti-Peronist interlocutor, “You only knew the barrio of tangos when an orchestra dressed in smoking jackets played them . . . that is why that parade of dignified little houses [built by the government] cannot move you like they do me.” Here, Discépolo criticizes the middle class for indulging vicariously in the culture of poor people without doing anything to address their poverty. Elsewhere, he exchanged tango’s nostalgia for Peronism’s clear distinction between the bad old days and the New Argentina: “The suburb of yesterday was nice to read about, but not to live in.”58 While tango’s nostalgia, melancholy mood, and tendency to indulge in fantasies of individual upward mobility made it ill-suited as Peronist propaganda, the genre’s populism—its celebration of the world of the urban poor—fit well with the new regime and allowed it to thrive.

It was during the 1950s that tango’s long reign as Argentina’s most popular musical form finally came to an end.59 The principal factors in its decline were economic and transnational. The postwar bonanza that Perón had overseen began to dry up by the late 1940s. As the agricultural export sector declined and trade imbalances grew, the economy stagnated. Real wages fell by 20 percent between 1948 and 1952.60 In this context, the popular dance craze of the preceding years could not be sustained. Lower wages meant fewer paying customers and a reduced nightlife. Cabarets and other dance spaces closed, and bandleaders could no longer afford to maintain large orquestas típicas. In their place, the 1950s saw the emergence of much smaller ensembles playing tango for smaller audiences who paid to sit and listen rather than to dance. Eventually, this development would lead to the cerebral “new tango” of Astor Piazzolla and others. These trends almost perfectly replicated events in the United States, where changing tastes and the difficult economic conditions of the immediate postwar years led to the decline of the big jazz bands and the fall of swing music. With the rise of bebop, jazz lost its sta-
tus as commercial dance music, as smaller bands played for reduced audiences of connoisseurs. This transformation in North American popular music was itself a key factor in the decline of tango. As I have argued, tango’s commercial success occurred in a unique transnational context. Tango thrived because it was the Argentine genre best suited to offer listeners an alternative modernism patterned on the sophisticated dance music of jazz bands. With the decline of big band jazz, tango lost its dance partner. The standard bearers of musical modernity, as defined by North American tastes, were now pop singers like Frank Sinatra and, by the mid 1950s, Elvis Presley and rock ‘n’ roll. Although more research remains to be done on the Argentine music scene of the 1950s, it seems reasonable to suggest that in this new context, tango no longer seemed very modern. As La Razón lamented with only slight exaggeration in 1956: “Sadly, the tango finds itself increasingly replaced in popular preferences by North American rhythms. First, dancers left it behind and now those who only like to listen to music are forgetting it. . . . On the radio dial, it takes work to find a tango program, most of which are relegated to non-commercial time slots.” Well suited to compete with the fox trot, the tango was no match for the new musical imports from the North.

Under Perón, the state exercised control over a vast mass cultural apparatus that had previously been governed by the laws of the market. The regime erected a massive propaganda machine and carefully controlled what was played on the radio and in movie theaters. Nevertheless, Peronism’s impact in this area was less than transformative. The popular genres of the period—film melodramas, radio soap operas, folk music, tango—were all popular in the period before 1943. More important, these genres saw only modest changes in their thematic content and in their relative popularity: folk music gained more prominence; tango declined after 1950; filmmakers were careful to situate social injustice in the past, while female characters were allowed more agency. In fact, Perón appears to have been far more interested in borrowing from mass culture than he was in transforming it, a wise political strategy given the legitimacy and popularity of commercial styles forged in a competitive marketplace. The strategy also made sense because the mass culture of the 1930s and early 1940s already contained within it a strong current of populism that was well suited to Perón’s political project. Stars such as Tita Merello, Antonio Tormo, and Alberto Castillo, who in different ways seemed to embody Peronist discourse almost perfectly, emerged from the commercial trends
of the previous period rather than from any official cultural program. Perón did not need to create such icons of popular anti-elitism, because they already existed.

**THE PERONIST APPROPRIATION OF MASS CULTURAL MELODRAMA**

The Peronist movement appeared almost overnight. In June 1943, when the GOU overthrew the government of Ramón Castillo, Juan Domingo Perón was an obscure army colonel. Little more than two years later, his policies and rhetoric had made him so popular among the Argentine working class that his colleagues in the military government arrested him rather than allow him to gain any more power. On October 17, 1945, thousands of Argentine workers flooded the Plaza de Mayo in downtown Buenos Aires to demand Perón’s release from jail, refusing to disperse until Perón addressed them from the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace. On this symbolic birthday of the movement, workers linked their futures to Perón’s and, in so doing, began to construct and inhabit a Peronist identity. After he won the presidential election of 1946, Perón’s enormous charisma—seconded in crucial ways by that of his wife, Eva—enabled him to disband the Labor Party, a coalition of unionists that had helped bring him to power, and to forge a more personal bond with the working class. Although no phenomenon in Argentine history has attracted as much scholarly interest, the roots of Peronism’s mass appeal remain mysterious. The commercial mass culture analyzed in this book represents a crucial piece of this puzzle. In the foundational period between 1943 and 1946, Perón’s rhetoric was deeply influenced by mass culture, a phenomenon that went far beyond the occasional use of lunfardo or of a tango-esque turn of phrase. In speech after speech, Perón spoke the language of popular melodrama, as it had been reworked on the radio and in the cinema of the 1930s. This language shaped Peronist discourse in fundamental ways, enabling it to resonate powerfully for workers whose consciousness was partially formed in dialogue with Argentine popular music, radio theater, and movies.

Historical analyses of Peronist rhetoric have stressed the essential binarism at its heart. Juan and Eva Perón explained their political project through a series of basic oppositions: national versus anti-national, pueblo versus anti-pueblo, workers versus oligarchs. Moreover, the logic
that the Peróns used to make these distinctions between us and them was always deeply moralistic; by opposing sacrifice to egotism, austerity to frivolity, solidarity to treachery, and hard work to idleness, Peronism depicted class struggle in essentially moral terms. Perón frequently denounced the exploitation of the working class, but he described it as part of a historic contest between good and evil. In a speech before the railroad workers union in 1944, Perón, then labor secretary, described his agenda as a “revolution of the poor. . . . The country was sick of important men; it is necessary that the days of simple, working men arrive.” He then denounced his opponents as representatives of “the eternal forces of egotism and avarice, that make the pocket into man’s only sentient organ.” Here, the conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat is initially described as a battle between rich and poor, “important men” and “simple, working men,” before being boiled down to a struggle against a particular form of immorality, namely greed. As Eduardo Elena has demonstrated, Perón’s promise to control the cost of living was central to his political rise. And when he turned from the sphere of production to that of consumption, Perón continued to operate within the discourse of moralism and binary oppositions. As he put it in another 1944 speech, “We are a dignified and proud country; and none of its children should have to tolerate ever again that Argentine workers be converted into shabby people (gente astrosa) so that a group of privileged individuals can hold onto their luxuries, their automobiles, and their excesses.” According to Perón, rising prices, like capitalist exploitation, were the product of immorality, in this case the selfish greed of merchants and speculators.

As many scholars have noted, Perón rejected class conflict and promised to achieve not the triumph of the proletariat but a state of harmony between labor and capital. Conflict and struggle characterized the past; Perón would bring about “the union of all the Argentines so that that struggle is transformed into collaboration and cooperation, so that we can create new values and not destroy uselessly, in a sterile struggle, values and energies that are the only forces capable of making men happy and nations great.” In order to create this harmonious national unity, Perón promised to do two things. First, he aimed to reduce the gap between the haves and the have-nots or, as he put it in a speech in Rosario in 1944, to “equalize a little the social classes so that there will not be in this country men who are too poor nor those who are too rich.” But redistribution of wealth was not enough. Class reconciliation
and social harmony also required a process of moral education and rehabilitation. The rich had to learn to behave morally, to renounce their greed and egotism and embrace the spirit of cooperation and solidarity. Perón described this learning process in a speech in 1946: “Our doctrine is simpler. I can now explain it with an example given to me by five boys in Paraná. Our doctrine embraces that first great humanitarian principle. They were in the port, and one of them had no boots. From on board, we threw him five pesos, which fell into the hands of one who was well dressed. The four boys who witnessed the scene said: ‘No, that’s not for you; that’s for him, who’s barefoot.’ And the boy gave the five pesos to the barefoot kid. This is our doctrine; we want one of those great gentlemen (grandes señores) to learn how to give to those who have no boots. We want that one day those who have everything sympathize with their fellow man, so that there are no more barefoot people and so that our children learn to smile from the moment they are born.” Rich people had to be taught generosity and selflessness, and for this, the best teachers were those beneath them on the socioeconomic ladder. Throughout Perón’s speeches, one finds constant praise for the noble, dignified poor as “simple,” “humble” people without pretension. In this discourse, the socially inferior are morally superior; national unity and class reconciliation can only occur when the rich learn to follow the example of the poor. The idea of the poor as teachers of the rich is one aspect of Peronism’s heretical inversion of hierarchy and part of a broader anti-intellectualism characteristic of the movement.

If Perón’s major goals included defending the poor and achieving national unity, he made those promises through a rhetoric filled with the vocabulary of work and production. According to a recent linguistic analysis, “politics is work” is the one “major metaphor” that Perón introduced to Argentine discourse. His repeated use of verbs such as to build, to construct, to employ, to produce, and to earn extended this basic metaphor. This language clearly had resonance for those Argentines who earned a living through manual labor. It lent concreteness and familiarity to abstract concepts like progress and justice. But the power of this discourse lay above all in its moral connotations. Perón pledged to “humanize capital” and to “dignify labor.” If the rich would be taught the virtues of solidarity and generosity, the poor would be publicly recognized as dignified, virtuous, and respectable. Honest, hard work was, in fact, the ultimate proof of moral superiority: “We struggle so that labor
may be considered with the dignity that it deserves, so that we all may feel the desire and the impulse to honor ourselves by working, and so that no one who is able to work may live only to consume.” For Perón, the hardworking poor were not just admirable; they were the most authentic representatives of the nation. In announcing his resignation from the army in the highly charged atmosphere of October 17, 1945, Perón made this vision explicit: “I leave, then, the honorable and sacred uniform given to me by the fatherland in order to put on the coat of a civilian and join with that suffering and sweaty mass that produces with its labor the greatness of the country. . . . This is the people; this is the suffering people that represents the pain of the mother earth, which we must vindicate. It is the people of the fatherland (Es el pueblo de la patria).” Here as elsewhere, Perón equated the Argentine nation with the people and the people with workers.

In its binary moralism, its emphasis on class harmony and national unity, as well as its depiction of the poor as authentic representatives of the nation capable of teaching the rich to overcome their egotism, Peronism reproduced the central themes of the mass culture of the 1930s. Whether in the films of Libertad Lamarque or the tangos of Celedonio Flores, mass cultural melodrama presupposed a Manichean world in which poverty was proof of virtue and wealth functioned as a sign of malice. The story of the milonguita, so often repeated, contrasted the safe, moral world of the humble barrio with a seductive, dangerous downtown filled with selfish rich kids and frivolous playboys. The comic films of Luis Sandrini as well as the packaging of tango stars like Carlos Gardel celebrated the essential goodness of the poor and expressed pride in their cultural practices and aesthetic preferences. Poor rural folk were depicted as paragons of simplicity and authenticity and contrasted with consumerist urban sophisticates. In the films of Manuel Romero, interclass romance was only possible when the poor character taught the rich one to exchange her egotism and condescension for solidarity and generosity. In all of these cultural products, the moral categories used to distinguish poor and rich were essentially the same as those taken up by Perón: the rich are greedy and frivolous, while the poor are hardworking practitioners of sacrifice and solidarity. When he celebrated the moral superiority, dignity, authenticity, and cultural inventiveness of the poor and attacked the egotism and avarice of the rich, Perón was drawing on the well-established melodramatic tradition that permeated 1930s mass culture.
Of course, the discursive affinities between Peronism and 1930s mass culture do not prove that Perón self-consciously imitated the movies and radio programs of the previous decade. The moral superiority of the poor was an idea that circulated within the larger cultural milieu that Perón shared with Argentine filmmakers and radio programmers. Catholic social thought, in particular, offered one possible source for this notion as well as for Perón’s rejection of individualism and bourgeois materialism. Catholic intellectuals had played an important role in the elaboration of right-wing, nationalist ideology. Perón was initially supportive of Catholic goals, and several prominent Catholic nationalists, including Oscar Ivanissevich and Virgilio Filippo, attained important positions in the government. Yet even if there were other possible sources for some of Perón’s language, there is reason to believe that the echoes of mass cultural melodrama in his rhetoric reflect purposeful borrowing. Perón’s concerted effort to cultivate and eventually control the media suggests that he recognized the political potential of mass culture, as does his decision to grant his actress wife a key role in his administration. As early as 1944, Eva Duarte put her radio stardom at the service of her future husband’s political project via a twice-weekly propaganda program aimed at a largely female audience. But regardless of his sources or intentions, Perón’s message certainly resonated with the meanings already widely disseminated in movies, music, and radio theater, and this resonance helps account for the power of his appeal. What I am suggesting is that one reason workers responded so enthusiastically to Peronism is that it was built out of discursive raw materials with which they were very familiar. As fans of tango and folk music and as longtime consumers of popular melodrama, working-class Argentines were already likely to see the world through the Manichean, moralistic lens that Perón used.

As Juan Perón began building his mass movement in the wake of the coup in 1943, he confronted a public that had been shaped by the explosion of mass culture in the previous couple of decades. Needless to say, other developments had been important as well: industrialization, migration, the resurgence of the labor movement, the political frustrations of the década infame. But the entertainment offered on the radio and in the movie theater had become a significant part of the everyday lives of Argentines of all classes. It would be an exaggeration to say that this mass culture had prepared working-class Argentines for populism. As I have tried to show, mass culture was ideologically ambivalent, oscillat-
ing between conformist and heretical messages. Neither can one claim that Peronism was a straightforward case of selective appropriation, that Perón simply adopted the subversive elements that circulated in mass culture while leaving aside its conservative aspects. On the contrary, Perón’s political success was due to his ability to overcome some of the central contradictions reproduced by 1930s mass culture. In order to do that, he could not take mass cultural populism as he found it; in politicizing commercial culture, he transformed it. At the same time, Perón did not manage to overcome all of mass culture’s contradictions. Peronism was a profoundly ambivalent movement, its discourse marked by numerous points of tension. Many of these ambivalences originated in the commercial culture of the previous period.

Part of Perón’s achievement lay in his ability to appropriate melodrama’s moralistic binarism while rejecting its fatalism. He managed, in other words, to depict society as divided between the noble poor and the evil rich, while simultaneously suggesting that workers need not accept the status quo. Perón appropriated the discourses of authenticity that made the poor central to Argentine national identity. Yet in mass culture, this vision of authenticity tended to lock the poor in a position of stasis. Since poverty was a sign of moral virtue and true Argentinidad, upward mobility and progress itself were problematic goals. Both the absence of factory workers in the movies and the omnipresence of nostalgia reflected a deep disjuncture between authenticity and modernity. If jazz was the music of modernity, then tango was authentic to the extent that it remained focused on the past. Argentine mass culture depicted the poor as authentically Argentine by virtue of their affinity with either the rural past of the gauchos or the turn-of-the-century urban underworld of the tango. This authenticity served to compensate the poor for their fatalistic acceptance of subordination.

Perón overcame this fatalism by articulating mass culture’s discourses of authenticity with a modernizing discourse of industrialization and economic nationalism. These commitments were hardly unique to Peronism. Calls for economic independence were central to both left- and right-wing nationalism in the 1930s, and by 1943 virtually every political party accepted the need for a state-led program of industrialization. But by combining these arguments with a melodramatic interpretation of society, Perón positioned the poor as the primary beneficiaries of industrialization. Economic nationalism and the promise of industrialization gave
him a way of connecting the poor to a particular vision of modernization. He could appropriate melodrama’s Manichean worldview without its fatalism. In effect, by fusing these very different discourses, drawn from very different sources, Perón managed to articulate authenticity and modernity more successfully than Argentine cultural producers ever had.\textsuperscript{77}

Another of Peronism’s key innovations involved placing workers, and particularly urban workers, at the center of its melodramatic vision of Argentine society. As we have seen, the mass culture of the 1930s tended to erase urban workers. The cinema of social critique concentrated on the plight of the rural poor, while the protagonists of popular melodramas were far more likely to be tango singers than factory workers. Perón appropriated melodrama’s depiction of a society divided between noble poor and hateful rich, but he applied this vision to the travails of actual contemporary workers. Just as important, through the prominence of Eva Perón, Peronism granted new visibility and legitimacy to women workers.\textsuperscript{78} By persistently invoking the suffering and pain of Argentina’s workers, Peronism lent mass cultural melodrama greater specificity and relevance.

Perón’s focus on workers was part of a collective mode of address that helped him begin to reconcile the pursuit of upward mobility with the celebration of working-class identity. As I have argued, mass culture catered both to working-class pride and to envy of the rich. White telephone films enabled poor viewers to feel morally superior even as they fantasized about wealth. Carlos Gardel was a hero for having achieved fame and wealth, yet tango lyrics condemned social climbing as petty and doomed to fail. In this way, mass culture promoted both the pursuit of individual achievement and the defense of collective interests. It attacked the rich for their selfishness and greed, even as it indulged the popular desire to experience the good life. Perón sought to avoid this contradiction by offering an upward mobility that was fundamentally collective. By addressing workers not as individuals, but as members of a social class, he suggested they could attain a higher standard of living without acting selfishly. By organizing in unions and supporting Perón, they could enjoy the benefits of a more egalitarian distribution of wealth. Useful in this regard was the Peronist concept of the state as the guarantor of social justice. In Daniel James’s words, Peronist rhetoric envisioned the state as “a space where classes—not isolated individuals—could act politically and socially with one another to establish corporate rights and claims.”\textsuperscript{79}
Perón constantly trumpeted the state’s capacity to provide the poor with a comfortable standard of living and to enable them to enjoy material benefits previously reserved for the rich. Perón thus appropriated from mass culture both the rags-to-riches fantasy and the idea of the moral superiority of the poor, but his capacity to use these discourses politically required creative reworking. In particular, he combined them with a corporatist vision of society and with the concept of an activist state, both more likely drawn from Italian Fascism than from Argentine movies and radio.80

Nevertheless, individualism and consumerism persisted. Despite Peronism’s rejection of elite materialism and its celebration of the generosity of the poor, the tension between class pride and class envy never quite disappeared. James has suggested that one of Peronism’s advantages over traditional leftist parties was precisely its ability to express workers’ desires for expensive consumer goods. In particular, he argues, the figure of Eva Perón provided working-class women with a model that legitimized their feelings of envy and resentment.81 Building on this argument, Barbara Weinstein has contrasted the Argentine case with that of São Paulo, Brazil. The working-class Brazilian women she studied were unable to generate any alternative to the dominant ideal of respectable femininity embodied in the middle-class housewife. By contrast, the image of Evita as a lower-class woman who snubbed Argentina’s rich society ladies while dressing in Christian Dior enabled women workers to feel that they too could be beautiful and glamorous.82 Similarly, Peronism’s annual coronation of a “working-class beauty queen” entailed a rejection of the long-standing idea that manual labor made women ugly. This vision amounted to a resignification of femininity but one that was limited, in that it did not challenge conventional forms of beauty. As Mirta Lobato, María Damilakou, and Lizel Tornay point out, contestants in Peronist pageants were judged beautiful to the extent that they approximated ideals depicted in glossy fashion magazines.83 Similarly, Eduardo Elena has demonstrated that the Peronist magazine Argentina catered to workers’ desire to emulate bourgeois or elite aesthetic preferences, enabling its readers to go “window shopping,” indulging the fantasy of luxury and wealth.84 As Evita herself put it, responding to those who argued that the houses she built for the poor were too luxurious, “I want them to be luxurious. Precisely because a century of miserable asylums cannot be wiped out except by another century of ‘excessively luxurious’
homes. Yes, excessively luxurious. . . . I wish [the poor] to accustom themselves to live like the rich . . . to feel worthy to live among the greatest riches. For when all is said and done, everyone has the right to be rich on this Argentine soil . . . and in any part of the world. The world has sufficient available riches for all men to be rich. When justice is done, no one will be poor, at least no one who does not want to be.” Eva Perón offered working-class women a utopia in which they might acquire what had previously only been available to the rich: beauty, expensive clothes and jewelry, fancy homes. Even as it celebrated working-class culture, Peronism publicly acknowledged working-class envy.

Peronist expressions of envy, consumerism, and even materialism reflect the movement’s mass cultural roots. After all, poor people’s resentment of the rich—visible, for example, in the tango singer’s complaints about the bacán whose wealth enables him to steal the singer’s girl—drew much of Argentine melodrama. Azucena Maizani dressed in fur and Carlos Gardel performed in black tie to allow their working-class fans to fantasize about attaining wealth. Niní Marshall’s Catita thrilled her audience both by rejecting elite notions of good taste and by aggressively pursuing the things that the rich could afford. The notion that poor women might aspire to beauty and glamour was hardly a Peronist invention; it was implicit in the career of Libertad Lamarque and so many other actresses who played bellas pobres, poor, honest, and selfless women from the barrios, whose beauty enabled them to attract the leading man. As a poor girl from the interior who had attained unimaginable status and prestige in the big city, Eva Perón embodied and expressed the fantasy of the milonguita. The Peróns’ debt to this tradition distinguished their brand of populism from a more orthodox leftist appeal. Peronism appropriated mass cultural discourses that expressed both the popular resentment over social inequality and the popular desire for the trappings of wealth. This discursive framework imposed limits on the utopias Peronism might imagine. Thus, Peronism often endorsed bourgeois standards of propriety and conventional models of beauty. It also reproduced the contradiction between working-class pride and envy, a contradiction that resurfaced whenever economic conditions prevented the state from delivering on its economic promises to workers. In a sense, these limits were the consequence of Perón having built his movement out of melodrama rather than Marxism.

Several of mass culture’s other contradictions persisted within Pe-
ronism. For example, at the heart of Peronism was the contradiction between liberation and control, between mobilization and authoritarianism. The movement invited workers to play an active role in history, but it also asked them to obey their leaders and to stay off the streets. It represented both a heretical challenge to hierarchy and a self-conscious attempt to discipline the masses. Obviously, these different faces of the movement responded to the exigencies of different historical moments. When he was seeking power, Perón emphasized mobilization and heresy. Once in control of the state, he reverted to discipline and social control. Yet here too one finds the traces of mass culture. It seems reasonable to suggest that the contradiction between conformism and populist heresy so central to the cinema and radio of the 1930s represents one source of Peronism’s ambivalence. Argentine mass culture disseminated a visceral anti-elitism, even as it depoliticized class conflict and suggested the futility of social transformation. Peronism’s simultaneous commitment to a frontal assault on the oligarchy and to social harmony and class reconciliation betrays its origins in melodramatic mass culture.

Another of Peronism’s contradictions was its deeply polarizing impact. A regime that claimed to pursue class harmony and national unity excoriated its enemies, defining them as selfish, corrupt, and anti-national oligarchs. Juan and Eva Perón’s vituperative language was matched only by that of their political opponents, who denounced “the dictatorship” and heaped scorn on “that woman.” Perón tried to build a multiclass coalition but failed. Instead, his regime produced a fundamental schism in Argentine political culture that would last for decades. This division reflected in part the material effects of Peronist policies. For example, even though factory owners stood to benefit from Perón’s nationalist economic policies, the leading association of industrialists joined the opposition once it became clear that Perón’s support for unions would dramatically alter the balance of power on the factory floor. Yet the emergence of a rabidly anti-Peronist opposition was not simply the result of rational economic calculation. The advent of Peronism provoked a powerful reaction from white-collar workers, clerks, professionals, and other middling groups. Many of these groups benefited from Perón’s expansion of the public sector as well as his support for unions, but they suffered profound status anxiety in the face of the new rights and benefits enjoyed by those beneath them on the social hierarchy. They deeply resented the invasion of Buenos Aires by what they saw as a dark-
skinned, lower-class rabble from the interior. A deep-seated, middle-class, anti-Peronist identity thus emerged within only a couple of years of Perón’s rise to prominence.

Perón’s discursive debt to mass culture helps explain his failure to win over these middling groups. Seeking to enlarge his base of support beyond the labor unions, Perón convoked three huge rallies in 1944 aimed explicitly at the middle class. Yet his speeches on these occasions reveal his inability to appeal to middle-class concerns. Although he praised the middle class as essential to the progress of any modern nation, he called on its members to overcome their “inferiority complex” and their individualism, to emulate workers by organizing themselves in unions, and to “sacrifice for the common good.” The appeal to self-sacrifice and solidarity and the condemnation of middle-class social striving echoed 1930s mass culture. Films and tango lyrics indulged rags-to-riches fantasies but criticized the more mundane pursuit of upward mobility. Mass culture celebrated the working-class kid who struck it rich as a tango star but generally skewered the idea of education and self-improvement as a respectable path to a better standard of living. Having inherited and endorsed this critique of selfishness and egotism, Perón had little to offer the middle class. He could tolerate and even encourage working-class envy, but he had no patience for the middle-class pursuit of status. By appropriating the populist message of mass culture and linking it to actually existing workers, Perón alienated middle-class Argentines, for whom even mass cultural populism suddenly seemed threatening. Antonio Tormo and Alberto Castillo, whose populist appeal hardly constituted a novelty in the worlds of folk music and tango, now appeared as scandalous symbols of the Peronist mob.

If Peronism was unable to forge a unified nation, it was in part because the mass culture it drew on was itself fundamentally polarizing. It is not only that the melodrama so central to Argentine radio and movies was premised on an irreconcilable division between rich and poor. It was also that Argentine popular music, radio theater, and movies were profoundly populist. In Ernesto Laclau’s terms, these mass cultural commodities presented popular culture as “an antagonistic option” against the elite. As I have argued, efforts to purge tango of its illicit and lowbrow associations or to treat it as primitive, folkloric raw material for a sophisticated art form failed, as did the attempts to forge a national identity on the
basis of Argentina’s rural cultures. Insofar as these images were stripped of their plebeian associations, they lost their capacity to represent the nation. In the same way, Manuel Romero could emulate Hollywood directors like Frank Capra, but he could not reproduce Capra’s national myths. The work ethic might conquer class prejudice and enable interclass romance in Hollywood, but in Argentina, the rich woman would have to reject her class in order to be with her working-class lover. Argentine mass cultural commodities contained divisive class messages. In a very real sense, tango meant identifying with the barrio boy who loses his girl to the aristocrat; folklore meant celebrating the simplicity and generosity of the rural poor against the materialism and selfishness of the rich; and films like Romero’s meant siding with the culture of the working poor rather than with that of the cosmopolitan elite. Weinstein points out that the working-class model of femininity enabled by Eva Perón was premised on the denigration of elite women and therefore precluded a cross-class feminist alliance. But Evita’s hostility simply recapitulated dozens of mass cultural representations of scornful, condescending elites: the wealthy mothers who rejected Libertad Lamarque’s characters as too common for their sons, to cite just one example.

Perón’s use of mass culture was innovative, but his innovations did not include the introduction of class hostility; that element was already present. In his early efforts to win over the middle class, Perón tried to forge class reconciliation, but like the mass cultural reformers of the 1930s, he failed. The melodramatic moralism that Perón appropriated from mass culture helped inject a populist divisiveness into his rhetoric. In the relatively unfettered, transnational marketplace for mass culture, the radio and film producers of the 1930s reworked existing popular cultural forms into powerfully populist genres and styles. Perón then appropriated these, articulating them with other ideological elements and reconfiguring them in the process. James argues that Peronism’s “heretical power” derived from its ability to articulate workers’ private, previously unnamed experiences of exploitation and mistreatment. Yet in an important sense, these experiences, as well as the values and assumptions through which they were interpreted, had been publicly named already; they were named every day on movie screens and radios. Through these mass entertainments, the Argentine poor had already been interpellated as the noble, dignified, long-suffering, and authentic
pueblo. What Perón did was take this message and make it the basis of politics and policy. This gesture helped him attract legions of working-class followers, but it also alienated elite and middle-class Argentines. In other words, the populist images of the nation that circulated in mass culture were deeply polarizing. Perón’s use of those images helps account for the divisiveness of his appeal.