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# The Fashion of Politics. Argentina from the 1940s to the 2000s

Deeply marked by the emergence of Peronism, throughout the second half of the twentieth century external appearance in Argentina functioned not merely as a powerful symbol of politics but also, and particularly, as the precise way in which politics and society were related to each other. Since the *descamisados* (the shirtless: the name given to General Perón's supporters) and Eva Perón's clothing in the 1940s until the mini-skirts and beards in the 1970s (used as clues to identify political opponents), ways of showing one's appearance have expressed the very character of Argentinian politics and the nature of the relationship between political and social issues in this country. The purpose of this article is to revisit Argentinian history of the last century by examining the main images that politics conferred on and received from society, and to employ the conclusions that can be drawn from this revision to discuss the present Argentinian situation with the tools provided by a historical perspective.

## The Electoral Campaign of 1945–46: The Beginning of the Fashion of Politics in Argentina

Buenos Aires, Argentina; the last month of 1945. The whole country is frenetically involved in the electoral campaign that would finish the following year with the presidential elections scheduled to be held on February 24. On December 14 the political forces grouped to support the candidacy of Colonel Juan Perón organised a huge meeting at the *Plaza de la República* in the centre of the city. Certainly, the paramount moment of the political meeting was its finale, when the military officer who had become presidential candidate gave his speech. On that occasion, Perón said:

> We are against no one. We are for the country. That's why we'll keep on shouting viva and never shout for anyone to die. We'll peacefully parade

> through our streets, enthusiastic about our cause, without describing anyone as rabble, not even as *descamisados*, to compensate to those who have hurled scornful descriptions. We'll have our heart properly placed beneath our shirts, which is better than having it improperly under a jacket![1]

After he had finished his speech, a person emerged from the massive audience and gave the candidate a stick with a white shirt tied to it. Perón took the stick and waved it like a flag: a clamorous celebration of his attitude constituted the final act of the meeting. However, for many others, the behaviour of the military candidate was far from deserving any kind of approval: his waving of a shirt immediately provoked a vast protest from his rivals – according to them, the colonel had insulted the national flag. A few days later, a lawyer initiated a criminal prosecution against Perón for disrespect of national symbols. From that day onwards shirts and people who wore them, the so-called *descamisados,* became the main symbol of Peronism. Moreover, Perón's reference in this speech to the *descamisados* was one of the most important initial moments of a phenomenon that would dominate Argentinian political perceptions for many decades: it shows that external appearance functioned as a powerful symbol of politics.

Precisely, the main purpose of this article is to revisit Argentinian history in this period by examining the political meaning attached to external appearances. This survey will make it possible to isolate some of the main features of the relationship between politics and society. It will be our contention that in recognising, for instance, ways of dressing as *political signs* people in Argentina were employing a form of reading that derived directly from a political scenario where politics and social issues were strongly intertwined and that this entanglement would crystallise with the emergence of Peronism and would last almost until the end of the last century. In the final part of this paper, we will employ the conclusions that can be drawn from this revision to analyse the present Argentinian crisis and say something about the conditions of its possible developments.

## Shirts as a Political Banner: Social Differences and Political Alignments in Peronist Argentina

In the 1940s the term *descamisado* was used in Argentina to describe a man who did not wear a jacket. Thus, despite its literal sense, the word *descamisado* was applied to a man who only wore a shirt. In those days, not to wear a jacket was far from being merely a personal habit of showing one's appearance. In principle, to have one or not was a sign through which social status was recognised: in this sense, wearing a jacket symbolised that its owner was, or aspired to be seen, as a member of the most respectable strata of society. Moreover, wearing a jacket was more than a mark of a real or feigned highly regarded social status: in some of the main cities of the country men had to wear jackets to enter certain urban zones. Before the eruption of Peronism in Argentina, the strength of this custom was far from harmless: for example, in the early 1940s men who were not wearing a jacket would not have been allowed to walk along the elegant *Calle Florida*, a street in the centre of Buenos Aires, at the very core of the most respectable neighbourhood of the capital.

By waving a shirt at the important meeting on 14 December Perón showed his awareness of the significance, under those circumstances, that clothing could have in visualising political alignments in Argentina. In this sense, Perón not only did not reject the label employed by his adversaries to discredit him and his followers but also took it precisely as a symbol of membership of the by then rising Peronism. By waving a shirt, the military candidate reinforced the idea that his political crusade was committed to the defence of the lower social strata, the humble and poor people: the *descamisados.*

Certainly, the identification of the *descamisados* with Juan Perón's followers was not confined to the events that took place during the presidential race of 1945 and 1946. Together with terms like *cabecita negra* (little black head), the expression *descamisado* was synonymous with Perón's supporters.[2] However, this figure itself symbolised the very image of Peronism in office. At the massive meetings organized during Perón's two first presidencies (1946–1955), the leader of the Peronist movement addressed his audience looking like one of them (that is to say, without a jacket). Moreover, the most important monument planned by Peronism to celebrate its glory was, precisely, an enormous statue of a *descamisado*. In sum, the figure of the humble, the poor man characterised as a person who did not wear jackets became the quintessential image of the movement.

As we have pointed out, even though Peronism captured the figure of the *descamisado* and partially re-signified it (by attaching a new set of political meanings to it), the movement led by Perón did not create the symbolic importance of this costume. Moreover, neither Peronism nor its *conductor* were the sole producers of the process by which this figure begun to work as a political symbol. As can be deduced from the section of Perón's speech cited above, the military candidate was not the first to use this word during the electoral campaign. As can also be inferred from that very quote, those who had began to use the term were the colonel's adversaries.

Nonetheless, less important than its very origins, the figure of the shirtless was affixed to Peronism. In other words, this particular form of dress was attached to a symbolism (originally sociological, later political) that was unanimously shared by Argentinian society of that epoch. For, if the Peronist regime assumed itself to be the government of the *descamisados* by themselves, the perception of Peronism's opponents mirrored the one that sustained their enemy: since, for them, Perón's rule represented not merely the government of but especially the government by the *descamisados*. Thus, despite their antagonistic readings, Peronists and non-Peronists were both framed by a similar perception: a political portrayal taken from (and fuelled by) a sociological perception that prevailed before Perón's election. In political terms, some of the most important features of the implications of this elaboration of pre-existing social perceptions were, again, very well illustrated by a particular way of dressing and the reactions they provoked: that of Eva Perón.

## Eva Perón's Dressings: Elegance as Convention and Subversion

After her tour of Europe (1947), Eva Perón begun to acquire a powerful centrality in the Peronist Regime. Certainly, this centrality had to do with some of the new responsibilities that Perón's wife started to assume. As pictured by the Peronist regime

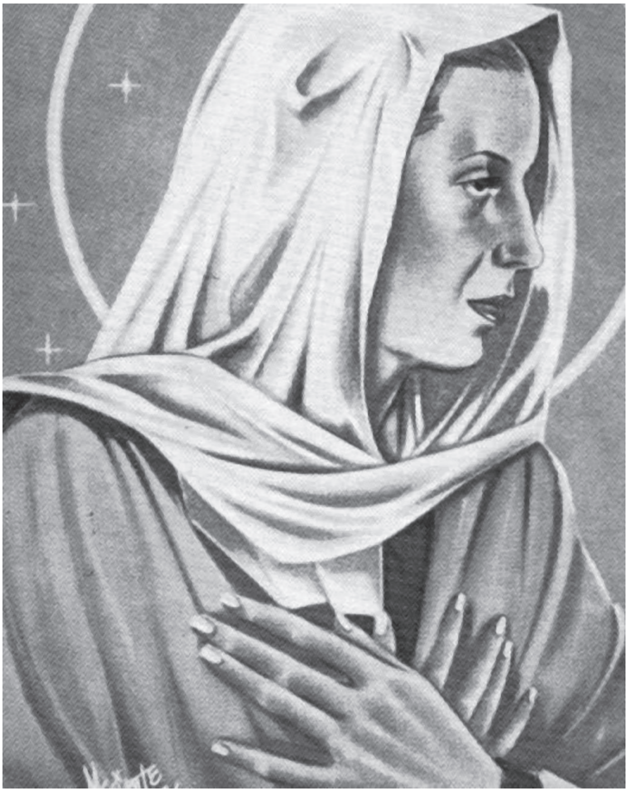
*Fig. 1: Santa Evita, 1950s*
*© Gustavo Castagnola*

(and repeatedly proclaimed by the President's wife herself) Eva Perón began to play the role of an intermediary between the leader and his followers (in Peronist official terminology: a »path« or a »bridge« between Perón and the *descamisados)*. And this role of intermediation was, above all, a social one. Notwithstanding the role that she had had in some political matters (an importance that has been frequently underestimated), Eva Perón's conspicuous position during the Peronist government was attached to the *Fundación de Ayuda Social* (Foundation for Social Assistance). The most widespread image of Perón's wife is the one that shows her fulfilling her duties at the head of this foundation: a young, blonde woman with bun and wearing a suit (generally grey or brown).

Rock operas and Hollywood movies have created the impression (even among some Argentinians) that this representation is *the* image of Eva Perón: this is to say, the one that constitutes the best portrayal of her historical (political and social) significance. Undoubtedly, as we have indicated, the activities of the *Fundación de Ayuda Social* were extremely important during the Peronist regime and, consequently, the pictures of its leader fulfilling her role of social assistance are an important illustration of the historical meaning that the Peronist experience had for Argentina. Moreover, this was the kind of portrayal that Peronism in government preferred when diffusing the President's wife's activities.

Nonetheless, during the 1940s and for most Argentinians, the best representation of Eva Perón was not the one usually employed by Peronist propaganda or later popularised by show business. Among the Peronists, one of the most widespread images of Evita (as her followers called her) represented her as a saint. Pictures of *Santa Evita* were not infrequent before 1952, but from that year onwards (when she died after a long period of illness) such portrayals of Evita themselves became one of the archetypical representations of her. However, Eva Perón's best representation was in a series of photographs taken at the *Colón Theatre*, the *National Congress* and many other important places in Buenos Aires. She appeared wearing elegant dresses designed by Christian Dior and other European fashion houses, in some of them with her husband, other times alone. Together with those depicting her as a Saint, these photographs were *the* image of Evita for her followers: these photographs were (and still are) the ones generally present in Peronist homes (during her life, after her death, throughout the extensive period when Perón was in exile and his movement was banned – 1955-1972 – and even today). These pictures are a powerful symbol of what this leader epitomised for her followers: this is a representation of a young woman who, from her humble origins, had reached the very top of Argentinian society; her presence in the most important places of the country wearing dresses designed by the most important houses of Europe concentrated everything women of that time, particularly the humble ones, dreamt of.

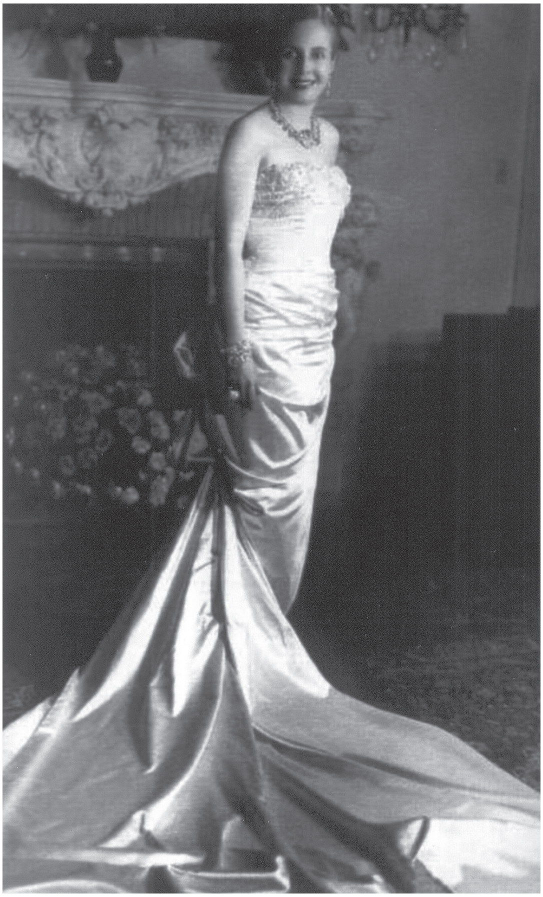

*Fig. 2: Evita, the real thing: the woman beloved & hated © Gustavo Castagnola*

However, this set of imagines of Eva Perón was the best portrayal of her not only for the Peronists. The image of ›that woman‹ (as her adversaries usually referred to her) wearing, for example, Dior's dresses at the *Colón Theatre* was also the best representation of the President's wife for the anti-Peronists. According to them, this image was a representation of the remarkable achievements that a very young woman who came from an extremely humble (and consequently obscure) social origin was capable of attaining by becoming the lover of a military officer: namely, to chart a meteoric course from being a very poor and almost unknown radio-actress to occupying the leading role of the most important system of social assistance of the state.

In this way, these images of Eva Perón were not only the best symbol of her historical, political and social significance for her followers, but also for her enemies: both sections of Argentinian society found the main significance of the nature of her leadership in her more elegant clothing, the one used by the upper social strata.

The different but symmetrical symbolic importance accorded to Eva Peron's ways of dressing provides us with a way of understanding some crucial implications attached to the overdetermination between political and sociological perceptions that have affected Argentinian history since the inception of Peronism; in particular, the ambiguity of the political readings that the movement founded by Perón would be able to produce.

For, on the one hand, Peronism could be portrayed as a movement interested in the maintenance of the social order. Certainly, especially when in office, Perón repeatedly stressed this conservative facet of his political force; in this sense, even the defence of the popular sectors was usually presented by the Peronist state as the best way of protecting the existing social order. The widespread popularity that imagines of *Evita* wearing graceful, European-made dresses had among her followers indicates that this conventional reading of Peronism was not confined to governmental propaganda. Nevertheless, this movement stimulated readings that did not always regard it as committed to the fulfilment of conservative goals. On the contrary, and on the other hand, Peronism was able to symbolise the total subversion of the system of authority upon which society rested. Certainly this was the point of view of many of those who were the enemies of the president and his wife. For them, Perón's regime had to be attacked mainly because of the challenge it represented to the balance of forces that regulated the relationship between social classes. This was the kind of perception that made the photographs of ›that woman‹ in the *Colón Theatre* wearing dresses by Dior the very symbol of Peronism: a regime that transformed a humble woman into a respectable one with outstanding political responsibilities eroded the values that sustained social authority.

The extent to which Eva Perón's dresses functioned as a political sign thus provides us with a path to comprehend some of the complex and ambiguous features that the government of the *descamisados* and, above all, by the *descamisados* had for Argentinian society. Despite its conservative political, ideological and even propagandistic components, for many Argentinians, Peronism represented a very serious challenge to the practice of deference within the social order.

In September 1955 the Peronist regime would fall. Perón's overthrow (and exile) was rooted in a very complex set of political processes that still await a comprehensive explanation. However, notwithstanding the causes of the breakdown of the Peronist regime, the nature of the rupture that accompanied its emergence was present not only in the political significance attributed to Perón's ousting but also in the goals that the new balance of political power would try to achieve. As an Argentinian politician and a military officer (both of them involved in the successful conspiracy that resulted in Perón's overthrow) put it, the 1955 episodes marked »the victory of one class over another class«[3] and their promoters would pursue the objective that »in this country the son of a street cleaner dies as a street cleaner«.[4] In the following years, and regardless of Perón's exile (1955-1972) Argentina's history was dominated by this antagonistic relationship between Peronist and non-Peronist groups. Furthermore, despite the political ban on the Peronist movement, the challenge to the social order that Peronism seemed to imply was far from diminishing its strength; on the contrary, during the latter half of the 1960s the political significance of Perón and his movement began to experience an unexpected and dramatic shift: a change dressed in clothes of vibrant colours and invested with even more dangerous features.

## The New Look of Peronism: Revolution and the Fashion of Argentinian Youth

When the city of Córdoba was rocked by a huge civil riot on May 29 1969, the prominent presence of the youth was one of the most noticeable features. Led by students and young union leaders, most of the population of this extremely important urban centre of the country launched what would be the first challenge to the authority of the military dictatorship that had seized power in June 1966. In this way, one of the circumstances that would transform the so-called *Cordobazo* in one of the crucial watersheds of modern Argentinian political history was the fact that this episode marked the massive entrance of the youth into the political arena: young women dressed in colourful mini-skirts and young men wearing beards and long hair played a vital role in disputing the control of the streets with the police so successfully that the army had to be called in to restore order.

In many respects, the appearance of the youth as a new social and political actor was not peculiar to Argentina. The eruption of young people as a novel social group defined by the possession of particular values, behaviour and, certainly, specific ways of dressing, was a phenomenon witnessed in many continents. By 1969 not only had the conversion of this new social actor into a political agent already taken place in many countries, but regardless of how radical they might be, the general direction of the political changes demanded by all these sectors followed a similar path: namely, the denunciation of abuses in capitalist society and the construction of a different social order. In this sense, and taking only the Latin American region into account, the Cuban revolution was an early, spectacular and certainly radical example of these experiences, but certainly not a unique one.

Nonetheless, the transformation of the youth into a political actor in Argentina had a very particular feature: most of these young women and men found that their fight to build a new and better society was perfectly compatible with some of the main political goals usually supported by Peronism. The *peronización* (Peronization) of the youth during the sixties in Argentina was indeed a remarkable fact. Until that moment, Peronism had been usually identified with right-wing policies and ideologies and its success among young people had been strictly limited to the members of the lower strata of Argentinian society. During the 1960s, the association that most Argentinian youth began to make between the history and struggles of the movement led by Perón and left-wing political positions (and even, and specially, with socialism) implied a total reshaping of the political significance attributed to Peronism.

The process by which the emergence of the youth as a new social actor ended in its identification with the Peronist movement's political banners has to be traced back to the similarities that many Argentinians found between the lifestyle of the youth and the habits promoted by the Peronist regime. The wearing of mini-skirts by young women and long hair and beards by young men were generally portrayed by many adults as a challenge and sometimes even a rupture of the rules of social deference. However, among non-Peronist adults this rupture would be read within a political framework: the resemblances between youth behaviour and the practices introduced under Perón's and Eva Perón's leadership were quickly and explicitly postulated. In this way, and despite its novelty, the lifestyle of the youth brought an experience to the present that Argentina had known in the past: a potential challenge to social authority, which was immediately perceived in *political* terms. The habits of the youth were thus not only politicised but also assimilated into those carried out and glorified by Peronism. The overdetermination between youth and Peronists struggles was thus the result of a reading by which a relation of equivalence was fuelled by anti-Peronist adult groups. Certainly, from the beginning of the 1960s, Perón from his exile tried to adjust his discourse to the new political conditions created in Latin America by the Cuban revolution. Nonetheless, the parallels he established between his movement's banners and slogans and those sustained by the young followers of, for example, Fidel Castro and even Che Guevara and Mao, received their most powerful backing in the readings of the leader's enemies: who associated a mini-skirt with a defiance of a social order that had been inaugurated in Argentina by Peronism.

It is not surprising that many young women and men, in particular those from the middle social strata (sectors that had been traditional adversaries of Perón) began to build a perception that mirrored the one framed by their parents (though arriving at very different conclusions). For these youth were learning from the adult world not only that their new behaviour, values and external appearance could have a political dimension. They also began to perceive what they might have in common with the enemies of the former generation. In this way, for many young Argentinians educated in anti-Peronist homes, Peronism and its main political banner (Perón's return to Argentina) became their main political cause. In doing so, these young people were vindicating not just their own new identity as social actors but also a concrete way of transforming the political order. As we have pointed out, the perception by which Peronism was portrayed as a movement that defied the social order was certainly not new. However, by the end of the 1960s the kind of challenge that Perón's movement represented had acquired a new, more extensive and more radical dimension.

The *peronización* of important sections of Argentinian youth created relations of equivalence between Perón's return to Argentina and the defence of practices like the right to wear beards or wear mini-skirts. Even the photographs of Evita that began to circulate in this period were very different from those that had been adored and repudiated in the 1940s and 1950s. Reflecting the new significance attached to Peronism, the displaying of Evita's ›new‹ look (without the bun, and informally dressed), recovered from photographic archives, established a clear relationship between her and other young women who (like her) intended to dedicate their youth to creating a better world.

However, the type of confrontation that Peronism began to represent was far more radical than in the past. For Perón's return to Argentina began to be represented not only as the victory of those who defied the traditional patterns of social authority but also as the point of departure of a political process that would destroy the capitalist order as such: proclaiming their loyalty to the exiled leader, especially from the beginning of the 1970s, left-wing guerrilla groups would appear in the political scenario to initiate the fulfillment of this goal.

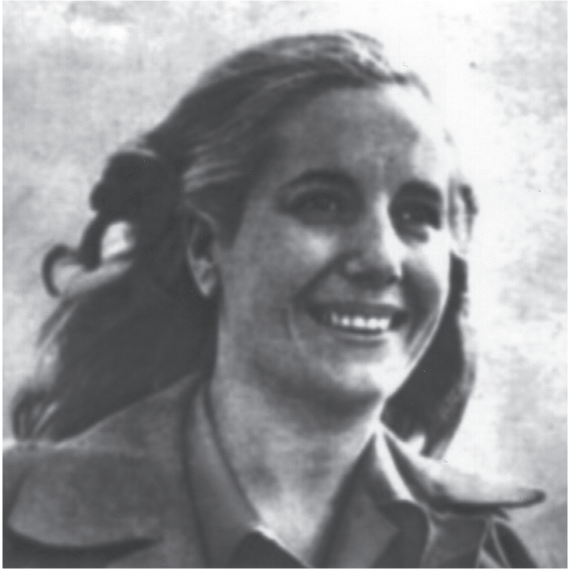

*Fig. 3: Evita's look disseminated in the 1970s (of a photograph taken in the 1940s) © Gustavo Castagnola*

In 1972 Perón returned to Argentina. In May 1973 Peronism returned to power. In October of that same year, Perón assumed the presidency, although only for a few months: on July 1 1974 the old leader would die in office. Perón's death initiated a quick breakdown of the Peronist government, which was finally overthrown by a military coup on March 24 1976. The cruellest military dictatorship in Argentinian history would certainly concentrate its efforts on the destruction of what was called the »subversive danger« and the restoration of »order« in Argentinian society. To face this task, the military implemented a vast plan of repression, which was not confined to suppressing the activities of guerrilla groups.

## The Fashion of Subversion: the Restoration of Order by the Military Dictatorship

In spite of being of central importance in the ›anti-terrorist‹ crusade undertaken by the armed forces, episodes like the ›disappearance‹ of people by paramilitary units, the massive execution of real or presumed ›terrorists‹ and the erection of concentration camps do not show us the whole picture of the systematic strategy of extermination and control applied by the military between 1976 and 1983. On the contrary, behind the spectacular brutality of these acts is the less obvious but vaster capillarity and efficacy of military authoritarianism. The genuine significance of this operation of annihilation launched against important sectors of Argentinian society can only be adequately understood if we take into account the idea of »subversion« given by the dictatorship: a »subversive element« was not merely a person who advocated the building of a new society but any individual who, in any way, by any means, defied the traditional system of authority. The scope of this notion of »subversion« was certainly extremely broad. For, according to the armed forces, the traditional system of authority was any system of authority and, consequently, »subversion« was any kind of confrontation. As General Videla, first president of the military dictatorship stated: subversion »is not only what you see in the streets. It's also the fight between sons and parents, between parents and grandparents. It's not only killing the military. It's about all kinds of social confrontation too«[5].

General Videla's notion of »subversion« as entailing »all kinds of social confrontation« was neither a personal interpretation of the nature of the fight to restore order nor just mere rhetoric. The dictatorship chose union leaders and ordinary workers as its main target: 30 percent of the victims of its terror came from the core of the Peronist movement. However, the scope of the activities led by the armed forces included many others who were considered at the time to be the very incarnation of ›social confrontation.‹ As the national commission created to investigate the disappearances in Argentina during the last dictatorship has established, people between 21 and 25 years old were the age group most affected by the actions of the military (33 percent); and the age range between 16 and 35 amounted to 81 percent of the total missing persons.[6] As General Videla indicated, the ›fight‹ between generations was certainly taken into account by the military government.

In providing such wide understanding of what was to be called ›subversion‹, the dictatorship reflected a sense of authority certainly compatible with the one sustained by the institutions that provided the main support to the military government: the armed forces. However, many of the codes employed by the military to recognise signs of subversion were not certainly created by them (and even less used only by them in order to identify risks to the authority).

The detailed control established over forms of personal appearance (in squares and streets but also in schools, colleges and universities), was evidence not only of the meticulous zeal that the dictatorship put in its efforts to ›restore order‹ but also of the extent to which these checks were implemented by employing criteria not exclusively possessed by the military. If, for example, the length of skirts and hair length had to be supervised, and men (particularly young ones) were not permitted to wear a beard in their identification-card photographs, this was because there were forms of personal appearance that many Argentinians regarded as attempts to confront and eventually even to rupture the rules of social deference and authority, and therefore as forms of ›subversion.‹ In this sense, many of the brutal means by which the military dictatorship tried to eradicate the different ›challenges‹ to any authority in Argentina can be considered an original contribution made by the armed forces. It is far less evident, however, that the perception that in 1976 the country was in danger of complete dissolution as a result of the activity of ›terrorist elements‹ and, above all, that the ›subversive enemy‹ was potential or actually behind a mini-skirt or a bearded man, were another particularly innovative contribution by the military. For, since the appearance of Colonel Perón in the Argentinian political arena in the 1940s, many Argentinians (mostly civilians) considered the country to be upside down: and mini-skirts, long hair and bearded men were nothing but a renewal of that challenge to deference and authority that the *descamisados* and ›that woman‹ had represented in the past.

## Conclusions

As Umberto Eco[7] has indicated, signs are such only by reference to a discourse. What makes it possible for us to read something as a sign of another thing is a particular code. It is this previous system of interpretation of data that makes it possible for anything to be understood as a sign. As we have pointed out, in Argentina during the second half of the twentieth century forms of appearance functioned as political signs because a code in which the political and the social realm were intertwined dominated Argentinians' perceptions; and this overdetermination between the social and the political has to be traced back to the inception of Peronism.

Peronism introduced a new articulation of the political order based on the incorporation of the until then excluded subaltern social groups. Nevertheless, this incorporation was not merely the recognition of the political rights of these groups. From its very outset, this movement proclaimed the inclusion of the popular strata (and, in particular, of the working class) by proposing a radical redefinition of the idea of citizenship. Before the emergence of Juan Perón as political leader, citizenship was reduced to a set of political rights. Colonel Perón reshaped the idea of citizenship by incorporating into it, and actually putting at its very core, a social content. Under the perspective encouraged by Perón, the set of rights associated with citizenship was primarily identified with social issues. The incorporation of the popular sectors in this way also reshaped the political alignments that would divide political life in the country for the rest of the twentieth century. Two features of this framework were absolutely crucial. First, Peronism enlarged the scope for political identities by linking them to the field of social differences. Politics was presented as an activity mainly concerned with the interaction among different social groups around social issues. Second, and taking political advantage of the sociological perceptions prevailing before its inception, Peronism pictured these interactions around social issues within a polarised antagonistic schema. Social differences were portrayed as warlike divisions. In this way, the eruption of the popular sectors in Argentinian politics through Peronism transformed the representation of the political arena into a battlefield in which different social groups tried to impose their particular and irreconcilable goals.

Even though it is crucial to the understanding of the fixity of the political identities that would dominate Argentinian politics from 1945, the Peronist reshaping of the features of the Argentinian political alignments does not present the whole picture. It is very important to stress that this way of picturing the political arena (as dominated by dividing social disputes represented by antagonistic political forces) was assimilated by non-Peronist groups as well. In fact, since 1945 and almost until the end of the previous century, the division between Peronist and non-Peronist political sectors dominated Argentinian politics. Although not in a totally exclusive way, the political postures had mainly to do with the attitude towards Peronism and Perón: the central problem in Argentinian politics was whether to be in favour of or against Peronism and Perón. This shows the centrality that Peronist discourse had acquired. Regardless of whether someone was for or against Peronism, the political arena could only be represented along sharp antagonistic lines, that is to say using the imaginary and representational resources provided by the Peronist rupture.

This rupture was the code that allowed the reading of forms of external appearance as political signs. The different forms of external appearance functioned as signs of social condition. As we have pointed out when alluding to the *descamisados* in the 1940s and the young during the 1960s, the way they looked like had to do with the stratum of the society they belonged to. In a society where, since the emergence of Peronism, politics had crucially to do with social issues, forms of personal appearance were not merely a sociological fact but a political one. This is what made shirts, evening dresses, mini-skirts, beards, and long hair not only political symbols but also indications of identifying political alignments. Furthermore, in a country where social differences were portrayed as confrontational, where patterns of deference were at stake, forms of personal appearance were pictured as concrete or potential challenges to authority. This is what made ways of dressing not merely signs of political positions but also the very symbols of acceptance or rejection of social hierarchy.

Nowadays politics is no longer in fashion in Argentina. The character and trajectory of the social claims that have erupted during recent years, under the most important social and economic crisis this country has witnessed in many decades (and probably in its modern history) are a clear illustration of the sharp detachment between politics and society that dominates Argentina's recent political developments. On the one hand, *cacerolazos* (demonstrations by the middle-class that shouts its anger by banging pots and pans) and *piquetes* (road-blocks carried out by organised groups of the unemployed), are paramount examples of the current unresponsiveness of politics towards social issues. Certainly, only a complete indifference by politics to the minimal satisfaction of social needs has made it possible to convert what Perón called a »too peaceful people« into a furious one.

On the other hand, these popular protests, which exploded in the country during the last months of 2001, are sporadic and fragmented; no social protest has been able to make itself the nucleus of a greater claim; no single demand has been able to enter a durable relationship with another one. The evolution of Argentinian history during recent decades can provide an explanation of the fitful and isolated nature of the social protest. The brutal enterprise of annihilation carried out by the military dictatorship, which was followed by years of rampant hyperinflation and then by more than ten years of neo-liberal economic policies, seriously damaged the Argentinian social body. The country that cried its wrath in 2001 was therefore an exhausted and wounded one: deeply hurt by the last dictatorship and by successive failures of its current democracy, the fragility of its social claims is nothing but the result of the weakness of a society abandoned by politics.

What consequences can be witnessed in this country that has separated political imperatives from social necessities? Argentina is getting tired of those who are (or pretend to be) its representatives. Twenty years after its restoration, the illusions that democracy had provoked after the nightmare of the military dictatorship have almost vanished in this country. Certainly, most Argentinians reject the men in charge of the system but not the system as such: politicians and not democratic institutions are still the target of the weak protests promoted by civil society. However, it is impossible to predict the strength of this lasting conviction in a democracy that seems to put the solving of social demands outside of its responsibilities. Particularly when this ripped society is, nevertheless, still capable of provoking the ousting of a government. The resignation of former President Fernando De la Rúa in December 2001 was not only the final outcome of the outrageous incapacity of his administration to manage the problems of the country but also the result of social mobilization: crowds from the shanty towns that attacked stores and supermarkets, *cacerolazos* and *piquetes* finally sealed the fate of this government.

Will the political leaders of Argentina's present democratic system annihilate it? For Argentinian politicians' tranquillity is not assured; surrounded by a civil society extremely debilitated but still in position of provoking the fall of a government and as long as they continue to be unable to hear social claims, they could be the main promoters of something that has begun to be called in Latin America »restrictive democracy«. Surely, Argentinians could conclude, even before the implementation of this ›solution‹, that politics has to have fashion and that, otherwise, democracy itself is no longer fashionable.

## Notes

1 This section of Perón's speech is quoted in Félix Luna, El 45. Crónica de un año decisivo, Buenos Aires 1984, 432.

2 The conflation of *descamisado* and Peronism has crystallised in Argentinian Spanish: In *The Oxford Spanish Dictionary* one of the variants of the Spanish term »descamisado« is »supporter of General Perón«, see The Oxford Spanish Dictionary, Oxford 1994, 241.

3 Mario Amadeo, Ayer, hoy y mañana, Buenos Aires, 1956, 98-99.

4 Miguel Gazzera and Norberto Ceresole, Peronismo. Autocrítica y perspectivas, Buenos Aires 1970, 63.

5 Quoted in Maria Seoane and Vicente Muleiro, El Dictador. La historia secreta y pública de Jorge Rafael Videla, Buenos Aires 2001, 220.

6 All the percentages have been extracted from the Report of the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, see Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, ed., Nunca Más. Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, Buenos Aires 1984, 294, 296.

7 See Umberto Eco, Il Segno, Milano 1973.