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***When Democracy Breaks:
Studies in Democratic Erosion and Collapse,
from Ancient Athens to the Present Day***

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Chapter 9

Democratic Breakdown in Argentina, 1976

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This chapter analyzes the democratic breakdown in Argentina in 1976, the final breakdown in Latin America before the first democratic transition of the third wave in the region (the Dominican Republic in 1978). Although Argentina was, after Brazil, the second most populous Latin American country to experience a breakdown during the very dark period for democracy in the region from 1964 to 1976, this breakdown has received little scholarly attention in the US and UK. Likewise, although Adam Przeworski and his coauthors² famously observed that Argentina in 1976 had a higher per capita GDP than any other country in the world that experienced a democratic breakdown between 1945 and 1990, the English

¹ I developed some of the core ideas in this chapter in collaboration with Aníbal Pérez-Liñán. A few paragraphs come from our book, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). I am grateful to María Victoria De Negri for excellent research assistance and comments, and to Carlos Gervasoni, Frances Hagopian, María Matilde Ollier, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, Luis Schiumerini, Emilia Simison, Natán Skigin, Eduardo Viola, participants at the conference on *When Democracy Breaks*, and the staff of the Tobin Project for comments. I dedicate this chapter to the memory of María Matilde Ollier, one of Argentina's great champions of democracy.

² Adam Pzeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

language scholarly literature that has explored this puzzle is thin. Why did a fairly wealthy country with moderate income inequalities experience a breakdown?

My argument about the Argentine breakdown focuses on three factors. First, extreme radicalization³ on the left and right greatly increased the stakes of democracy and quickly led powerful actors to shift away from supporting or accepting the regime. Argentina had long had right-wing sectors that were hostile toward democracy.⁴ One thing that changed before the 1973-76 period is that a major revolutionary left and a powerful radical labor movement emerged; the latter challenged the mainstream “verticalist”⁵ unions that had loyally obeyed Perón since the 1940s. The revolutionary left never had any chance of capturing power, but it galvanized an extremist response with the emergence of right-wing death squads, which were created and funded by the state. The revolutionary left and the radical labor and student movements generated fear in the conservative and centrist establishment, including most of the Peronist Party, the military, business, most of the Catholic Church leadership and clergy, and the centrist and conservative unions. The country was besieged by right-wing and left-wing bombings, kidnappings, politically motivated assassinations, factory seizures, and violent attacks on companies, newspapers, and cultural organizations. Violent anti-system actors from the right hoped to annihilate the radical violent left, and vice versa, with complete disdain for democracy.

Second, the democratic government proved woefully incapable of handling Argentina’s problems on the economic and public security fronts. Mismanagement created a profound economic crisis. Ill-designed policies produced hyperinflation (around 3500% annualized) in July 1975 and again early in 1976; first quarter 1976 inflation annualized reached 3000%.⁶ Incoherent policies

³ Radical actors are “*toward* one pole of the ideological spectrum ... in conjunction with an urgency to achieve those preferences in the short to medium term where they do not represent the status quo, or with an intransigent defense of the status quo where these positions represent the status quo.” Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall*, 14. An extensive contemporary literature highlights the impact of polarization on dampening democratic commitments.

⁴ Edward L. Gibson, *Class and Conservative Parties: Argentina in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Alberto Spektorowski, *The Origins of Argentina’s Revolution of the Right* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003); Eduardo Viola, *Democracia e Autoritarismo na Argentina Contemporânea*. PhD diss., University of São Paulo, (1982).

⁵ The “verticalist” unions faithfully obeyed Perón and viscerally opposed dissident unions and dissident movements within unions.

⁶ William C. Smith, *Authoritarianism and the Crisis of the Argentine Political Economy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 230.

created a gaping fiscal deficit of 17% of GDP in 1975.⁷ In tandem with hyperinflation, economic crisis, frequent strikes, and many factory and university takeovers, escalating terrorism from the far left and far right generated a widespread sense of chaos. The state, through state-created and funded death squads and later by inviting military involvement in combating the left and sanctioning gross human rights violations, was largely responsible for right-wing terrorism. Thus, the state not only failed to solve the public security threat, it was directly responsible for much of the violence. In response to the sense of chaos and, after July 1975, the growing sense of a power vacuum, actors that had welcomed democracy in 1973 clamored for a coup in 1976.

Third, even in the context of some extremely radical actors, democracy might have survived if non-extremist actors, especially the government, had embraced democracy. Attitudes about democracy affected the outcome because they shaped actors' behavior. President Juan Perón could have dampened radical extremism and bolstered the democratic camp if he had been committed to democracy. Instead, he initially opportunistically encouraged the revolutionary left and then, from the outset of the new democracy, turned to right-wing death squads to contain the revolutionary left. His support for extremist anti-democratic actors helped forge the cauldron in which democracy died. His decision to have his wife, Isabel Perón, be his Vice President quelled potential tussles within the Peronist camp in 1973, but it proved to be disastrous for democracy after he died. Isabel Perón (1974-76) was an extremely weak leader, and her closest advisor conspired against democracy by forming right-wing death squads. By 1975, only one major actor, the main opposition party, the centrist Radicals (Unión Cívica Radical, UCR), firmly supported democracy. But the UCR was in a weak initial position that grew weaker over time. The other main actors were either indifferent to democracy (the powerful labor confederation, most of the Peronist party, and initially some business groups and leaders) or hostile to it (the right-wing death squads, right-wing sectors of the military, other business groups, and the revolutionary guerrillas). It is very difficult for democracy to survive if the main actors are hostile or indifferent to its survival.

The Argentine breakdown of 1976 is emblematic of the dynamics that led to many democratic failures between 1964 and 1976 in the shadow of the Cuban revolution. Radical anti-system actors were committed to their own political goals even if their methods and objectives imperiled democracy. Extremism on one side of the political spectrum begot extremism on the other, making democracy untenable. The breakdowns that were most similar to Argentina 1976 in this respect include Chile and Uruguay in 1973. Conservative fears about leftist extremism were an important ingredient in most breakdowns in Latin America

⁷ Ibid.

between 1964 and 1976;⁸ the Argentine breakdown of 1976 was part of this larger dynamic. In this way, international influences contributed to the Argentine breakdown of 1976. And for this reason, the Argentine breakdown of 1976 opens a window into the dynamics of some breakdowns in Latin America from the time of the Cuban revolution until the end of the Cold War—especially those with powerful extremist authoritarian leftist forces.

Contributions

The Argentine literature on specific actors in the 1973-76 period is rich, as is the literature on the political history of the period. Many works have analyzed the revolutionary left, organized labor, the Peronist governments, and the military, among others. Several books have focused on the 1976 breakdown; among the best are those by Liliana De Riz⁹ and Eduardo Viola.¹⁰ However, to my knowledge, there are no major works on the democratic breakdown in English—although some excellent English language books on a few specific actors during the 1973-76 period supplement the extensive Spanish-language.¹¹

This chapter draws extensively on these literatures. I hope to add in two ways to this existing work. First, I hope to enhance the limited English language work on the 1976 breakdown. Second, this is one of the first works to use the Argentine case to contribute to broader theoretical and comparative debates about why democracies break down. Although there is an extensive Argentine literature on the 1973-76 period, little of it has deeply engaged broader theoretical and comparative debates about breakdowns. One of my aspirations is bringing this case into these broader theoretical and comparative discussions. I analyze the Argentine case in light of these broader literatures, believing that it sheds light on them; conversely, it is illuminating to consider the Argentine case from the perspective of the broader comparative and theoretical work on democratic breakdowns. Historical cases can teach a great deal theoretically about democratization and democratic breakdown—especially if the case directly engages the theoretical and comparative literatures. Case studies are crucial for

⁸ Kurt Weyland, *Revolution and Reaction: The Diffusion of Authoritarianism in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁹ *Retorno y derrumbe: el último gobierno peronista* (Mexico City: Folios, 1981).

¹⁰ *Democracia e Autoritarismo na Argentina Contemporânea*.

¹¹ On the Montoneros, see Richard Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón: Argentina's Montoneros* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). On the guerrillas, see María José Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle, 1969-1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

understanding the dynamics of breakdowns, and these dynamics often enhance theoretical understanding.

Theoretical Notes about Democratic Breakdowns

In this section, following Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñan,¹² I articulate four general points about studying democratic transitions, survival, and breakdowns. First, democracies emerge and survive or break down because of the purposeful action of concrete historical actors – presidents, militaries, foreign powers, party leaders, labor unions, paramilitaries, etc. Democracies break down if the actors that want to subvert them have the power to do so. Democracies survive if the actors that are invested in its continuity are more powerful than the actors that try to subvert it.¹³ I therefore focus on specific historical actors.

This perspective is a contrast to analyses that see the likelihood of democratic survival or breakdown as being heavily conditioned by structural, cultural, or other contextual factors. Structural and cultural factors condition who the actors are and what their preferences are – but within very broad boundaries. Democracy can survive in difficult structural and cultural conditions, as countless cases show,¹⁴ and it can break down despite favorable structural contexts, as the Argentine case of 1976 demonstrates.

In structural approaches, the nature of the actors and their preferences are more or less dictated by structural conditions. Yet who the key actors are and what their preferences are have great autonomy in relation to structural conditions. Broad structural and cultural forces exert only indirect influences on the formation, worldview, and behavior of actors. To understand democratic transitions, breakdowns, and survival, we need to analyze the actors themselves rather than assuming that structures or cultures strongly condition outcomes.

The second point involves who the actors are in democratic transitions, politics, and breakdowns. In the analysis of the Argentine breakdown, I focus on the four presidents from 1973 to 1976 and on organizational actors – the two main parties, the guerrillas, the military, organized labor, the paramilitary extreme right, and business associations. By focusing on presidents and organizational actors, I locate my approach between structural or long-term cultural approaches,

¹² *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall*.

¹³ Michael McFaul, “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World.” *World Politics* 54, no. 2 (2002): 212–44.

¹⁴ Scott Mainwaring and Tarek Masoud, eds., *Democracy in Hard Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

on the one hand, and agency and contingent action approaches, on the other.¹⁵ Having said that, because Juan Perón, who was the president from October 12, 1973 until his death on July 1, 1974, is easily the most prominent political figure in Argentina since 1946 and influenced many other actors, his decision-making figured prominently in the fate of democracy.

Some class approaches to political regimes see the poor, middle classes, and rich as the fundamental actors.¹⁶ I do not see this as a useful way to study democratic transitions and breakdowns in most contexts. The poor, middle classes, and rich are rarely cohesive political actors. Rather, they are usually politically divided along many lines, including race, religion, geography, ethnicity, nationality, and economic sector. In the US, for example, poor African Americans have different voting patterns and political beliefs than poor white people; religious individuals have different voting patterns and political beliefs than secular voters; and residents of large cities have different voting patterns than rural voters. These well-established facts suggest problems for thinking about the rich, middle sectors, and poor as cohesive political actors.

In many cases where there is conflict over the political regime, class does not predict organizational actors' position about the regime in any clear way. In democratic politics, organizational actors and presidents (or prime ministers) usually hold most power. Many important political actors are not clear expressions of social classes (or of the poor, the middle class, and the rich).

The third question is what the important issues are in democratic politics and breakdowns. Class approaches to democracy see conflicts over distribution as the only important issue.¹⁷ However, in most historical cases including Argentina 1973-76, other issues have been equally or more important. In Argentina, governmental incompetence, rampant political violence, and a widespread establishment fear of a leftist threat and a breakdown of social order were more important than battles over income redistribution. Except in cases of retrograde

¹⁵ For converging perspectives, see Nancy Bermeo and Deborah J. Yashar, "Parties, Movements, and the Making of Democracy," in *Parties, Movements, and Democracy in the Developing World*, ed. Nancy Bermeo and Deborah J. Yashar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1-27; Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Ziblatt, "The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies: A New Research Agenda for Europe and Beyond," *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 8-9 (2010): 931-68; Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (Cambridge, U.K., Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*; Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution*.

business sectors, there is little reason why moderate redistribution should motivate profound animus toward a democratic regime.

Whereas Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson and Carles Boix implicitly see routine income distribution and socialist revolution as part of a continuum, they are often sharply conflicting goals. In Argentina, labor unions and wide swaths of the popular sectors vigorously favored income redistribution, but most union and popular leaders completely rejected revolution. Whereas routine redistribution was not a central contributing factor to the Argentine breakdown, conservative and centrist fears about revolutionary and radical struggles that would have led to wholesale property expropriations and a complete reordering of Argentine society were.

The final general theoretical point is a cautionary note about essentialist assumptions that some classes consistently support democracy or authoritarianism. Acemoglu and Robinson and Boix posited that when revolution is not possible, the poor will support democracy because it redistributes income to them, and the rich will oppose democracy for the same reason. However, organized labor and most other actors are best seen as conditional democrats or conditional authoritarians.¹⁸ In Argentina, organized labor mobilized vigorously against a series of dictatorships from 1955 to 1973, but when democracy was restored in 1973, on the whole, it manifested indifference toward the regime's survival.

Most of the work on Argentina and most case studies on democratic breakdowns are consistent with these four points. However, they form a contrast to some prominent theoretical work on political regimes published in the last two decades.

Prelude to Democracy

Along with Chile and Uruguay, Argentina had one of the earliest democracies in Latin America, from 1916 to 1930. Until the 1976 coup, it was usually the wealthiest or second wealthiest (after Venezuela) country in Latin

¹⁸ Michael Albertus, "Landowners and Democracy: The Social Origins of Democracy Reconsidered," *World Politics* 69, no. 2 (2017): 473-501; Eva Bellin, "Contingent Democrats: Industrialists, Labor, and Democratization in Late-Developing Countries" *World Politics* 52, no. 2 (2000): 175-205; Steven Levitsky and Scott Mainwaring, "Organized Labor and Democracy in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 39, no. 1 (2006): 21-42.

America. Argentina experienced previous democratic breakdowns in 1930, 1951,¹⁹ 1962, and 1966; the country was one of the world champions of democratic breakdowns in the 20th century.

The military dictatorship that took power in 1966 aspired to govern for a long time, but in 1969 it fractured and began to collapse. The two main political parties, the powerful labor movement, and youthful leftists mobilized against the regime, and its support crumbled. Violent protests in 1969 helped bring down the dictatorship of General Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-70) in a military coup in June 1970. His successor, General Roberto Levingston, lasted only nine months (June 1970 to March 1971) before he was ousted by another coup. Finally, General Alejandro Lanusse (1971-73) from the outset planned to restore power to civilians, and did so by allowing elections in 1973.

Democratic Advantages and Challenges at the Dawn of Democracy in 1973

Although it unraveled quickly, democracy in Argentina (1973-76) was not doomed to failure from the outset. Conventional structural factors such as the level of development and the level of inequality were favorable to democracy. Przeworski et al. famously observed that no democracy had ever broken down with a per capita GDP higher than Argentina's in 1975.²⁰ In 1973, Argentina had the second highest per capita GNI (\$7441 in constant 2010 US dollars) in Latin America, behind only Venezuela; Argentina's per capita GNI was more than three times higher than that of South Korea (\$2333).²¹ At least from the 1950s (and probably earlier, but there are no good data) until the 1976 coup, Argentina had moderate income inequalities by world capitalist standards. Against this backdrop of moderately high income and moderate inequalities, Argentina has long been seen as an anomalous case of repeated democratic breakdowns despite favorable structural conditions.

Some other factors were auspicious. One of the biggest obstacles to democracy from 1946 through 1970, the profound enmity between the country's two largest parties, the Peronists and Radicals, dissipated. In November 1970, the two parties signed an agreement to work together for democracy and to eliminate

¹⁹ A military coup overthrew Juan Perón (1946-55) in 1955. However, by 1951 Perón had installed a competitive authoritarian regime; democracy had already broken down. The government committed large scale violations of political, civil, and human rights, and elections were no longer free and fair. Thus, I date the breakdown of democracy to 1951.

²⁰ *Democracy and Development*, 98.

²¹ World Bank Development Indicators, on-line, accessed January 25, 2019.

the proscription of Peronists.²² The Radicals' acceptance of the Peronists as a legitimate electoral contender boded well for democracy. The inclusion of the Peronists in the democratic game and their landslide wins in 1973 gave them a large stake in the regime. This rapprochement had the potential to build a core of democratic actors that dominated electoral politics and to end a major source of destabilizing democracy.

In 1973, when the new democratic regime began, the military was discredited. The military dictatorship of 1966-73 had fractured badly,²³ and the ascendant sectors of the armed forces led the transition to democracy. Most business groups defected from supporting the dictatorship and seemed willing to accept democracy.

I do not want to overstate the democratic potential that existed in 1973; I claim merely that democracy had a chance. If Perón and the first president of the democratic period, Héctor Cámpora (May 25 to July 13, 1973), had not stoked the revolutionary left in ways that alarmed conservative and centrist actors; if Perón had chosen a capable vice-president; and if economic policies had been sound, democracy could have survived. Democracy would have had an even better chance if Perón and an able successor had been able to push organized labor toward more restraint. There were some adverse circumstances from the outset—especially the authoritarian predilections of some actors—but these actors were reinforced by grave missteps by the sequence of presidents. These missteps pushed critical actors such as the military, most business groups, most of the establishment, most Church leaders, and most of Argentine society from a willingness to try democracy in 1973 to supporting a coup in 1976.

From Birth to Breakdown: A Tragedy in Four Presidents

Act 1: The government of Héctor Cámpora (May 25 to July 13, 1973)

Argentina's fifth democratic or semi-democratic regime of the 20th century began in 1973 as its most democratic ever. For the first time since 1951, the

²² Marcelo Luis Acuña, *De Frondizi a Alfonsín: La tradición política del radicalismo* 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1984), 198-203; Viola, *Democracia e Autoritarismo na Argentina Contemporânea*, 241-242.

²³ On the dictatorship of 1966-73, see Guillermo O'Donnell, *El estado burocrático autoritario* (Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano, 1982); María Matilde Ollier, *El fenómeno insurreccional y la cultura política (1969-1973)* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1986); Ollier, *Orden, poder y violencia (1968-73)* 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1989); Ollier, *Golpe o revolución: la violencia legitimada, Argentina 1966-1973* (Buenos Aires: EDUNTREF, 2005).

Peronists were allowed to field a presidential candidate. Running as Juan Perón's officially designated candidate, Héctor Cámpora (1909-1980) won a landslide in a free and fair presidential election on March 11, 1973,²⁴ and he assumed office on May 25, 1973. Cámpora ran because Perón had been banned, and his authority stemmed from having been designated by Perón.

Cámpora was a traditional left-of-center Peronist, and his seven-week term marked the apogee of power for the left. It was a period of massive popular mobilizations including scores of factory takeovers²⁵ and increasing left-wing violence even though the main guerrilla organizations refrained from armed attacks during his short presidency. The last five years (1968-73) of the military dictatorship had witnessed the emergence of the revolutionary left. It was much weaker than the authoritarian right, but it had a profoundly polarizing impact. One of the most powerful leftist guerrilla movements in the history of Latin America, it embraced violence as a way of life and of effecting political change.²⁶ The left expanded rapidly among student groups after 1969. By 1970, the Peronist groups *Montoneros* (originally of Catholic nationalist origins) and Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, FAR), as well as the Trotskyite ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo, People's Revolutionary Army) were in full operation.

The Montoneros were close to the Peronist Youth (Juventud Peronista, JP), a separate organization that first established an important political presence in the 1960s in the resistance against successive governments. The Peronist Youth radicalized over time, and in 1967, some members created the Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas (FAP, Peronist Armed Forces). The revolutionary left deeply penetrated Argentina's public universities. From then until its defeat around 1977, it waged constant violence against the armed forces, the police, leaders of the political right, and bureaucratic (conservative) labor leaders.

²⁴ Cámpora won 49.5% of the vote. Second place finisher Ricardo Balbín of the UCR captured 21.3%.

²⁵ Elizabeth Jelin reports an average of 30.5 strikes per month from June to September 1973. 43% of these strikes included workers taking over factories, so there were about 13 seizures of factories every month—almost one every other day. "Conflictos laborales en la Argentina." *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 40, no. 2 (1978): 421-63, 457, Table 1.

²⁶ Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón*; Ollier, *El fenómeno insurreccional y la cultura política (1969-1973)*; Ollier, *Orden, poder y violencia (1968-73)*; Ollier, *De la revolución a la democracia: Cambios privados, públicos y políticos de la izquierda argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI/Universidad Nacional de San Martín, 2009); Viola, *Democracia e Autoritarismo na Argentina Contemporânea*; Peter Waldmann "Anomia social y violencia" in *Argentina, hoy*, ed. Alain Rouquié (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1982), 206-48.

In his first day in office, Cámpora issued a pardon, signed into law the next day by the congress, that granted amnesty to 371 jailed members of left-wing revolutionary organizations.²⁷ Many of these individuals had committed serious crimes including homicide, kidnapping, theft, and assault. Cámpora's pardon had negative repercussions. It reinforced the hostility of the security forces, the Argentine right, and much of the center toward Cámpora; it convinced the security apparatus and the right that it might be impossible to combat the revolutionary left through legal means; and it gave a boost to the revolutionary left.

From the outset, the revolutionary left was a powerful pernicious influence in the new democracy. It contributed to a spiral of violence that weakened democracy and fostered the breakdown. It generated fear among other political actors. María José Moyano estimates that by 1974, the revolutionary guerrilla had 5000 members.²⁸ She constructed a dataset based on Buenos Aires newspaper accounts of violent actions committed by the revolutionary left, the paramilitary right, and collective actors for the four years before the democratic transition (1969-73) and during the democratic period of 1973-76. Even though these newspapers could not register all violent acts,²⁹ Moyano reported that the guerrilla forces undertook 1935 operations during the democratic period: 812 bombings, 481 killings, 251 attacks on property, 143 seizures of buildings or groups of buildings including 15 attempted seizures of military installations, 140 kidnappings, 107 thefts of arms, and one hijacking of an airplane. The actions of the revolutionary left and the radical left encouraged the formation of right-wing death squads, most of which functioned within the Peronist movement.³⁰ Left-wing and right-wing violent extremes flourished.

On June 20, 1973, Perón returned to Argentina after almost 18 years in exile. Perhaps two million people including hundreds of thousands of leftist supporters flocked to the Ezeiza international airport near Buenos Aires to greet him. In an early adumbration of what was to come, the terrorist right wing organized a sniper attack known as the Ezeiza massacre against the left at the airport, resulting in at least 16 deaths and several hundred wounded.³¹ The Minister of Social Welfare, José López Rega, who had been Perón's personal secretary while he was in exile

²⁷ Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, 103.

²⁸ *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, 2.

²⁹ Moyano included only incidents that were reported in a few major newspapers published in Buenos Aires. These newspapers could not have reported all violent actions, especially those outside of Buenos Aires and probably particularly those by the right-wing death squad, AAA. Crimes committed by the AAA with the collaboration of the police were less likely to be officially reported than other crimes, and they were probably therefore less likely to appear in newspaper accounts.

³⁰ *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36. Solid estimates have never been established.

in Spain, masterminded the attack. This event marked the first major public appearance of the paramilitary right-wing Peronists and the definitive break between the Peronist extreme left and extreme right.

Although Argentina had a long history of right-wing extremism before 1973, the far right had new elements during the 1973-76 period. Right-wing death squads kidnapped, tortured, and killed guerrillas, left-wing activists, and sympathizers in vastly greater numbers than ever before. The far right developed a more Manichean and apocalyptic world view that legitimated, in its eyes, the sadistic extermination campaign that it unleashed against the revolutionary left and leftist labor leaders, lawyers, public officials, and intellectuals.

The most important right-wing paramilitary organization was the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance (AAA), secretly created in 1973 by López Rega. Because of its access to vast state funds (López Rega funded it from the Ministry of Social Welfare), the AAA was by far the best resourced and largest of the right-wing death squads, and the one that assassinated most people and caused most damage to Argentine democracy. The AAA assassinated an estimated 2000 leftist and center-left politicians, labor leaders, leaders of leftist parties and popular organizations, judges, and others from 1973 to 1976.³² Although it was an underground organization, the AAA collaborated closely with the Federal Police.

On June 8, a government initiative led to the signing of an agreement between the main labor confederation, the General Labor Confederation (CGT, Confederación General del Trabajo), and the General Economic Confederation (CGE, Confederación General Económica), which primarily represented Argentine business sectors close to the Peronist orbit. The agreement, known as the Social Pact, was the center piece of economic policy. It attempted to contain the inflation rate, increase real wages, generate labor peace in a country that had been rocked by violent massive working-class protests in the previous four years, and boost economic growth. The plan proposed freezing prices and granting significant wage increases, but then freezing wages for two years. It greatly accentuated state intervention in the economy, with considerable state control over prices and increased subsidies and regulations.³³ Until the first quarter of 1974, the Social Pact lowered inflation and boosted real wages and growth, but these positive effects were short-lived. The CGE supported the government until the unraveling of the Social Pact in the second quarter of 1974.

After 1945, Argentina had the most powerful labor movement in Latin America. From 1945 until 1983, most of the labor movement was intensely loyal to

³² Marina Franco, "La 'seguridad nacional' como política estatal en la Argentina de los años setenta," *Antítesis* 2, no. 4 (2009): 857-85, 865.

³³ De Riz, *Retorno y derrumbe*.

Perón but indifferent to democracy.³⁴ Organized labor prioritized political power and material gains over democracy and unquestioningly accepted Peronism's authoritarian proclivities. Parts of the movement radicalized in the struggle against the military dictatorship of 1966-73, and labor insurgency helped bring down that dictatorship. This was the first time since 1946 that the left had made substantial inroads in Argentina's labor movement.

In office for only seven tumultuous weeks, Cámpora and the leftist members of his cabinet resigned on July 13 and called for new presidential elections to allow Perón to run. Perón and the Peronist center and right wanted to get rid of Cámpora because radical labor mobilizations and the revolutionary left's violence threatened to displace him and had already generated a sensation of social chaos and political threat. In a few months, the perception of the right and the center had shifted from considering Perón a threat to considering him a way to contain the growing leftist mobilization.

Act 2: Raúl Lastiri (July 13 to October 12, 1973)

Raúl Lastiri, the President of the Chamber of Deputies and a leader of the right wing of Peronism, assumed the presidency on an interim basis when Cámpora resigned. Lastiri's short tenure marked a turn toward the right wing of Peronism. His father-in-law, José López Rega, was Argentina's most notorious far right-wing Peronist.

Act 3: Juan Perón (October 12, 1973 to July 1, 1974)

Perón won the September 23 election even much more decisively than Cámpora had, capturing almost 62 percent of the vote. He took office on October 12, 1973. Although Perón was more willing to accept democracy in 1973 than he had been from 1946 to 1955, his democratic transformation proved to be shallow, as evinced by his opportunistic support for the revolutionary left until May 1973 and his support for right-wing death squads after that.

His eight and one-half months as president were marked by escalating economic problems, a growing militarization of politics, his repudiation of the Peronist left, and the shattering of the coalition that brought him to power. During

³⁴ James McGuire, *Peronism Without Perón: Unions, Parties, and Democracy in Argentina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Juan Carlos Torre, *Los sindicatos en el gobierno, 1973-1976* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1983); Viola, *Democracia e Autoritarismo na Argentina Contemporânea*, 510-511, 516-518.

the 1973-76 period, the Peronist Party was probably more ideologically heterogeneous than any other major party in the history of modern democracy. Until the falling out between Perón and the Montoneros in 1974, the ideological span ranged from revolutionary socialists, including sectors with ruthless totalitarian mentalities, to extremist reactionaries who formed death squads aimed at killing the revolutionary left and leftist students, labor leaders, lawyers, intellectuals, judges, and others. This extraordinary ideological heterogeneity was an asset when Peronism opposed the military dictatorships of 1966-73, but inevitably, it led to severe conflicts within Peronism after the transition. The Peronist party itself was highly subordinate to Perón for most of the period from its creation in 1946 until his death in 1974; it was never an important independent actor until his death. It was always more of a movement than a professionalized party.³⁵

In November 1973, a revision to the Law of Professional Associations led to the displacement of many radical left labor leaders, giving the upper hand to the conservative Peronist loyalists. The law imposed greater centralization and discipline in the labor movement at a time of massive factory-level mobilization and unrest.

Perón had expected that the revolutionary left would bend to his will, but this proved not to be the case. It viewed mainstream labor leaders as sellouts and believed that replacing them with leftists was essential to the revolutionary cause. Less than three weeks before Perón assumed the presidency, on September 25, 1973, the Montoneros assassinated the Secretary General of the CGT, José Rucci, who had been close to Perón.

Perón intensified the offensive against the Peronist Youth and the leftist revolutionaries. In late 1973, he signed the "Act of Commitment for National Security," which created a National Security Council and expanded the legal authority to prosecute the left. In January 1974, after 70 members of the ERP audaciously attacked a 2000-person army garrison in Azul, Buenos Aires, the government passed a new penal code to make it easier to prosecute the left. Perón denounced the ERP and called for "annihilating these criminal terrorists."³⁶ The new legislation banned factory occupations and made it easier to repress illegal strikes. In response to the ERP attack, Perón pressured a democratically elected

³⁵ Steven Levitsky, *Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America: Argentine Peronism in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁶ Cited in De Riz, "De la movilización popular al aniquilamiento (1973-1976)," in *Argentina: 1976: Estudios en torno al golpe de estado*, ed. Clara E Lida, Horacio Crespo, and Pablo Yankelevich (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2007), 35-58, 41.

leftist Peronist, Oscar Bidegain, to resign as Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires.

On February 28, 1974, a police coup overthrew the democratically elected center-left Peronist governor of the province of Córdoba, Ricardo Obregón Cano, and his vice governor. Perón subsequently announced his support for the coup. Córdoba had been the site of the country's most disruptive labor and student mobilizations against the previous military dictatorship, and it was home to some of the most combative left-wing labor unions.

In March 1974, the Montoneros assassinated Rogelio Coria, Secretary General of the Construction Workers of the Argentine Republic (Unión de Obreros de la Construcción de la República Argentina). On May 1, 1974, Labor Day in Argentina, in a major speech in one of the country's most important public spaces, the Plaza de Mayo, an enraged Perón denounced the Montoneros, saying that they were "mercenaries representing foreign interests."³⁷ Perón was angry about the Montoneros' assassination of Peronist labor leaders; their disdain for his wife, Isabel Perón; and their repeated clashes with his allies and government. This moment marked the definitive break between Perón and the Montoneros. Another leftist Peronist governor, Alberto Martínez Baca of Mendoza, was removed from office on June 6, 1974, weeks after the May 1 rupture and weeks before Perón's death.³⁸ With Perón's support, the AAA stepped up its assassinations of leftist labor leaders. In response to its dislocation from institutional spaces of power in the labor movement and in Peronist circles, the revolutionary left increasingly resorted to violence.³⁹

In the 1973-76 period, the labor movement was sharply divided, in part along ideological lines, and also in conflicts between union leaders and radical factory level leaders.⁴⁰ The peak leadership and dominant orientation of the main labor confederation, the CGT, was staunchly Peronist and anti-leftist. After the Montoneros assassinated José Ignacio Rucci in September 1973, the most prominent labor leader was Lorenzo Miguel, head of the Metalworkers' Union (Unión Obrera Metalúrgica, UOM) and of the "62 Organizations," a large group of unions that were unflinchingly committed to Perón. Some of these traditional labor leaders advocated strict adherence and subordination to Perón, while others

³⁷ Cited in De Riz, *Retorno y derrumbe*, 136.

³⁸ Unlike the coup against the governor of Córdoba, the subsequent Peronist removals of leftist Peronist governors were effected legally through the constitutional mechanisms of an impeachment or a federal intervention.

³⁹ De Riz, *Retorno y derrumbe*, 104-112.

⁴⁰ Because of spatial constraints, I do not discuss the conflict between radical bases and conservative union leaders. See Jelin, "Conflictos laborales en la Argentina," and Torre, *Los sindicatos en el gobierno, 1973-1976*.

such as Lorenzo Miguel demanded that labor function as a somewhat independent pressure group. Until July 1975, this faction had privileged access to power,⁴¹ but after Perón's death, even it faced increasing repression. The unions that followed the CGT line confronted the left, often violently.

The radical factions combatted the bureaucratic traditional union leadership, and vice versa. The radical factions ranged from some Peronist center-left unions, known as the "combative" (combativos), to revolutionary Peronism and unions with a Marxist leadership, known as "classist" (clasista) unions (Gordillo 2007; James 1976; McGuire 1997: 156-157).⁴² To simplify, I combine these factions and refer to them as the radical or leftist unions. These center-left (the combativos) and leftist factions had spearheaded the radical opposition to the military dictatorship of 1966-73.⁴³ The radical labor movement included the electric and auto workers in Córdoba, the printers' union in Buenos Aires, telephone workers, civil servants, railway workers, sugar workers, the Naval Construction Union, and typographers.⁴⁴

Act 4: Isabel Perón (July 1, 1974 to March 24, 1976)

After less than nine months in office, Perón died on July 1, 1974 at the age of 78. His widow and Vice-President, María Estela (Isabel) Martínez de Perón, took office. Isabel Perón's government was incompetent. It inherited a difficult situation because of the far left-wing and far right-wing violence, the extraordinary heterogeneity of the Peronist coalition, and the unraveling of the Social Pact. The government was completely unequipped to deal with the situation. Its manifest

⁴¹ Torre, *Los sindicatos en el gobierno, 1973-1976*.

⁴² Mónica Gordillo, "Sindicalismo y radicalización en los setenta: Las experiencias clasistas," in *Argentina, 1976: Estudios en torno al golpe de estado*, ed. Clara E. Lida, Horacio Crespo, and Pablo Yankelevich (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2007), 59-84; Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 215-242; McGuire, *Peronism without Perón*, 156-157.

⁴³ James, *Resistance and Integration*, 215-242; McGuire, *Peronism without Perón*, 265-270; O'Donnell, *El estado burocrático autoritario*.

⁴⁴ On the labor movement during the 1973-76 period, see Julio Godio, *El movimiento obrero argentino [1955-1990]: venturas y desventuras de la columna vertebral desde la resistencia hasta el menemismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Legasa, 1991); James, "The Peronist Left, 1955-1975," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 8, no. 2 (1976): 273-296; James, "Power and Politics in Peronist Trade Unions," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 20, no. 1 (1978): 3-36; Jelin, "Conflictos laborales en la Argentina"; McGuire, *Peronism without Perón*; Torre, "El movimiento obrero y el último gobierno peronista (1973-1976)," *Crítica & Utopía* 6 (1982): 1-16; Torre, *Los sindicatos en el gobierno, 1973-1976*.

ineptitude, combined with its involvement in the extreme right including death squads, deepened apathy and hostility toward the democratic regime.

Isabel was ill-prepared to become president, and she leaned heavily on her closest advisor, López Rega. Her term marked a sharp but erratic turn toward the far authoritarian right, with occasional shifts back to Peronism's labor base. The regime degenerated quickly. Armed confrontations between leftist guerrillas and rightist paramilitary groups escalated. López Rega quickly became the central figure in Isabel's government, leading to the ascension of the far right-wing sectors of Peronism and to increasing violence and legal measures against the left. The main political dynamics during Isabel's presidency revolved around conflicts among forces that had initially supported Juan Perón in 1973, and in particular conflicts between (and within) the revolutionary left, the labor movement, and the extreme right. The offensive against the left involved both institutional/legal and increasing state repression and paramilitary extra-judicial killings. In turn, the revolutionary left stepped up its campaign of assassinations, kidnappings, bombings, and other violent tactics to gain power.

The radical labor movement became marginalized and faced increasing repression while Perón was president and even more so after his death. Some prominent radical labor leaders were legally removed from their positions in July 1974 just after Perón's death, and the "classist" and "combative" leaders became increasingly isolated. The loyalist bureaucratic leadership supported the removal, repression, and killing of leftists. The radical leaders were increasingly displaced because of the repression and new regulations that made it easier to remove them.

In September 1974, the congress approved a new national security law (Law 20840), making it easy to arbitrarily detain individuals, declare strikes illegal, intervene unions, and ban media. The law fostered a reduction in the number of strikes and gave the union leadership more control over the rank and file.⁴⁵ Between August and October 1974, government interventions dismantled some of the most aggressive independent unions and removed opposition union leaders.⁴⁶ On September 6, 1974, in response to the growing repression and legal measures against the left, the leader of the Montoneros declared that it was time to go clandestine.

Isabel's government removed leftist Peronist governors in the provinces of Santa Cruz (Jorge Cepernic, October 7, 1974) and Salta (Miguel Ragone, November 23, 1974). On November 6, 1974, in response to the Montoneros' assassination of Alberto Villar, head of the Federal Police and a leader and a founder of the AAA, the government decreed a state of siege, which effectively ended most

⁴⁵ Jelin, "Conflictos laborales in Argentina."

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 441.

constitutional guarantees. The “62 Organizations,” the unions that adopted a conservative pro-Perón line, publicly supported the state of siege.

The government’s offensive against the left extended to higher education. Richard Gillespie writes that after August 1974, “fifteen of the sixteen universities were intervened and their rectors replaced, ... By July 1975 ... 4000 faculty members had been sacked, and 1600 students had been imprisoned.”⁴⁷

The militarization of politics worsened as the AAA stepped up its campaign to murder leftists. As Isabel Perón’s government became more isolated, it increasingly turned to the military in the hopes of garnering its support. The military governments’ failures from 1966 to 1973 and the deep internal schisms these failures had produced a temporary military retreat from overt political involvement during the presidencies of Cámpora, Lastiri, and Juan Perón. However, under Isabel’s government, the military became deeply involved in politics, as in the past, as a profoundly anti-democratic actor.⁴⁸

The federal government formally decreed military interventions in the provinces of Tucumán in May 1974 (while Juan Perón was alive), in Catamarca in August 1974, and again on February 5, 1975 in Tucumán, where the ERP had a strong presence. These military interventions re-engaged the armed forces as a political actor actively involved in repression and combatting the revolutionary left. Juan Perón had wanted to keep the armed forces out of politics, but Isabel and López Rega demanded that the military combat the revolutionary left and leftist labor leaders. These military interventions granted the armed forces sweeping powers in the efforts to defeat the revolutionary left. The 1975 military intervention in Tucumán, known as “Independence Operation,” (“Operativo Independencia”) marked the establishment of the first clandestine detention center and the de facto escalation of the “dirty war,” with the regular use of torture and “disappearances.”

By 1975, the democratic regime had degraded deeply. I define democracy as a political regime characterized by 1) free and fair elections for the head of government and the legislature; 2) wide adult suffrage rights (nearly universal in today’s world); 3) respect for political rights and civil liberties and the institutions designed to protect them; and 4) civilian control over the military and paramilitary forces; the officials who are elected in free and fair elections must be able to carry out their policies without vetos from armed actors.

⁴⁷ *Soldiers of Perón*, 157.

⁴⁸ De Riz, *Retorno y derrumbe: el último gobierno peronista*. Second edition. (Buenos Aires: Hyspamérica, 1987), 190, 201.

Although democracy in Argentina began with free and fair elections in 1973, as the above discussion makes clear, it was vitiated from an early time by glaring democratic deficits. The regime squarely met the second condition of democracy (full suffrage for adults), and in 1973 it met the first (free and fair elections). However, starting in 1974, the police coup against the democratically elected leftist Peronist governor of Córdoba and constitutional but democratically dubious removals of freely and fairly elected leftist Peronist governors in four other provinces (Mendoza, Buenos Aires, Santa Cruz, and Salta) violated the principle that free and fair elections determine who governs. From the outset, with an escalation after Perón's death, there were massive human rights violations (the third principle of democracy). Moreover, in violation of the fourth principle of democracy, Isabel Perón's government invited growing military involvement in politics in an effort to combat the left-wing terrorist threat (Franco 2009). Also in violation of the fourth principle of democracy, paramilitary death squads and the military increasingly dictated major public policies (e.g., how the government dealt with the revolutionary left, other sectors of the left, and the radical working class movement).

The best democracy indicator, V-Dem, gives Argentina a very low (for a democracy) liberal democracy score of 0.33 in 1974 and 0.31 in 1975.⁴⁹ In light of the massive violations of human rights, the coup against and removals of democratically elected governors, and by 1975 the lack of military subordination to civilian authorities, these low scores are appropriate. By the second half of 1975, the regime had degenerated so profoundly that I view it as a competitive authoritarian regime. Córdoba after the democratically elected governor was removed by a coup in 1974 had an unequivocally subnational authoritarian regime, as did Tucumán by early 1975, given the extensive powers given to the military, the existence of a clandestine detention center, and massive human rights abuses. De facto, then, Argentina was arguably a case of democratic breakdown via executive takeover of democracy before it became a case of breakdown via military coup—but a strange one because the widespread sense of a power vacuum in Argentina in 1975-76 stands in dramatic contrast to the purposeful machinations of leaders such as Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Erodogan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.

The revolutionary left continued to assassinate mainstream labor leaders. In 1975, the Montoneros killed Hipólito Acuña, Vice-Secretary (Secretario Adjunto) of the 62 Organizations, which represented the country's unions that were faithful to Perón and rejected leftist positions, and Teodoro Ponce, Vice-

⁴⁹ These scores range from 0 (extraordinarily authoritarian) to 1 (extraordinarily democratic).

Secretary of the Union of Metal Workers (UOM). The Peronist Armed Forces (FAP) murdered Marcelino Mansilla, the Secretary General of the Union of Construction Workers (Unión Obrera de la Construcción, UOCRA of Mar del Plata) on August 27, 1975, and the ERP assassinated Atilio Santillán, Secretary General of the Federación Obrera Tucumana de la Industria Azucarera (FOTIA) on March 22, 1976, two days before the military coup, claiming that he had betrayed the working class struggles.

On October 5, 1975, in an audacious operation, 60 Montoneros attacked an army garrison in the northern province of Formosa. As part of the operation, they hijacked an airplane and seized control of the local airport. That month, while Ítalo Luder, the President of the Senate, was acting president, the government announced a military intervention throughout the whole of Argentina, extending the role of the armed forces in combating the revolutionary left and the combative and classist union movement.

Whereas public opinion had accepted and even supported the revolutionary left's use of violence to defeat the dictatorship of 1966-73, under democracy, society became tolerant of right-wing extremism as a way of restoring order.⁵⁰ Moreover, left-wing violence led the public to shift away from supporting the democratic regime. By 1976, actors that had supported the return of democracy in 1973 embraced the toppling of democracy. After the economic collapse and hyperinflation of mid-1975, the government and the democratic regime lost support, and the opposition became more fervent. Nobody believed that Isabel Perón's government was capable of addressing the panoply of serious problems.

The Peronist party was occasionally an important actor after Perón's death—especially in the decision about whether to democratically remove Isabel Perón from the presidency in 1975.⁵¹ With the defection of one faction of the Peronist Party to the opposition, Isabel lost majority control in the Chamber of Deputies. Because of deteriorating health, she took a leave from September 13 to October 17, 1975. During this period, as the acting president, on October 6, Ítalo Luder, created the Consejo de Seguridad Interior (Council of Domestic Security), which formally deepened the military's role in "the struggle against subversion" and subordinated the Federal Police and the National Penitentiary System to the military. Isabel resumed the presidency on October 17. The Peronist leadership in congress could plausibly have worked with the UCR to explore ways of removing her, but instead, it endorsed the traditional Peronist orthodoxy of "verticalism." By late 1975, it resigned itself to the impending coup.

⁵⁰ Ollier, *Orden, poder y violencia (1968-73)*, 101.

⁵¹ Mario D. Serrafiero, "Juicio político y derrumbe institucional en la Argentina (1976)," *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 8, no. 2 (1997): 41-66.

Right-wing business groups began to mobilize against the democratic regime after Juan Perón's death. The most visible pro-coup business organization was a new association, formed in August 1975, the Permanent Assembly of Business Associations (Asamblea Permanente de Entidades Gremiales Empresarias, APEGE). It went on the offensive against the government after the hyperinflation and economic collapse of July 1975. APEGE represented Argentina's main business associations including the Argentine Rural Society (SRA), the Argentine Rural Confederations (Confederaciones Rurales Argentinas), the Argentine Business Chamber (Cámara Argentina de Comercio), the Argentine Construction Chamber (Cámara Argentina de la Construcción), the Argentine Commercial Union (Unión Comercial Argentina), and many others. From its creation, the APEGE worked to undermine Isabel Perón's government, denounced the economic and social chaos, demanded drastic policy changes, and in *sotto voce* encouraged a coup. Big agricultural producers launched some de facto strikes against the government in September and November 1975, provoking food shortages.

By late 1975, the military was contemplating overthrowing the government. On December 18, 1975, a coup attempt launched by air force officials failed. As Liliana De Riz notes, by then, a widespread expectation that a coup was imminent prevailed.⁵² Five days later, the ERP attacked Argentina's largest army base in a poor suburb of Buenos Aires, Monte Chingolo, to disastrous effect; it was their last major military operation. Early in 1976, some Peronist leaders continued to look for a way to replace Isabel, but to no avail. In January, Isabel Perón again changed her cabinet in a futile attempt to regain political support and initiative. By then, almost everyone expected a breakdown.

On March 24, 1976, the coup finally came. It ended Argentina's shortest-lived competitive regime and intensified a reign of terror that had begun when Perón was in office and became dramatically worse after his death. The coup enjoyed widespread popular support;⁵³ the failures of the democratic regime were many and profound. In response to the leftist threat and the chaos that followed Perón's death, some factions of the military including those that led the 1976 coup and governed from 1976 until 1981 were far more virulent than previous military dictators.

The coup was the final blow to democracy in Latin America before the onset of the third wave of democratization only two years later. When Isabel Perón was swept out of office, 17 of the 20 countries in Latin America had authoritarian regimes. Only Costa Rica and Venezuela had democracies, and Colombia had a

⁵² De Riz, *Retorno y derrumbe*, 141.

⁵³ Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo, *La dictadura militar, 1976-1983: del golpe de estado a la restauración democrática* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2003).

semi-democratic regime. The period from 1964 to 1976 was one of the worst for democracy in Latin America in the 20th century.

Explaining the Democratic Breakdown

Three main factors contributed to the breakdown. First, powerful anti-system actors on the far left and the far right made it very difficult for democracy to survive—much as occurred in the German and Czech cases studied in this volume and in Spain between 1931 and 1936. Kurt Weyland argued that during the 1960s and 1970s, the establishment greatly overestimated the radical leftist threat in most Latin American countries, and that based on the fear created by this exaggerated threat, it undertook a series of military coups that ousted democratic governments.⁵⁴ This argument about the overestimated leftist threat is correct for some cases, but in Argentina, the radical left threat was real. The radical left had absolutely no chance of capturing state power, but it had enormous disruptive capacity, as evidenced by the huge number of kidnappings, political assassinations, factory takeovers, bombings, violent student and popular protests, and massive riots. When rampant violent collective protest continued under the new democracy, it began to generate a sense of uncontrollable violence and chaos. Moyano reported that from May 25, 1973 to March 24, 1976, there were 28 collective violent attacks on property, 265 seizures of property, 129 bombings, 49 kidnappings, and 42 assassinations, not including the guerrilla attacks and right-wing groups.⁵⁵ Citing an Argentine newspaper, *La Opinión* of March 19, 1976 (just five days before the coup), Gillespie affirmed that there was a politically motivated assassination every five hours and a bomb explosion every three.⁵⁶

Some guerrilla attacks displayed remarkable operational capacity and audacity—although terrible judgment about the political effects of the violence they spewed.⁵⁷ Before they went clandestine, the Montoneros and the Peronist Youth frequently mobilized scores of thousands of people in the streets, and sometimes hundreds of thousands.⁵⁸ Gillespie observes that the Montoneros were “the mightiest urban guerrilla force ever seen in ... Latin America.”⁵⁹ In 1975, the ERP controlled a significant percentage (perhaps 1/3) of the territory of the province of Tucumán. Moyano summarized, “the seizure (of property) frenzy

⁵⁴ *Revolution and Reaction: The Diffusion of Authoritarianism in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁵⁵ *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, 70.

⁵⁶ *Soldiers of Perón*, 223.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 193-205.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 134-135, 148-149.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

conveyed the sense of a generalized crisis of authority, that the established hierarchical order in the public and private spheres was under siege.”⁶⁰ Even though guerrilla attacks on police and military units had limited success, they demonstrated a military capacity and audacity that galvanized the armed forces, Perón and the Peronist right wing, and most of the centrist and conservative establishments. The belief that there was a real subversive threat was central to the motivations of the Argentine military when it toppled Isabel Perón’s government.

The combative and classist labor unions were also radical actors. In addition, many unions controlled by the conservative labor leadership faced radical grass roots opposition. Hundreds of thousands of university and high school students, even those who never joined the Peronist Youth or one of the guerrilla organizations, mobilized for radical change. Students and workers occupied factories and universities on a seemingly constant basis. These other radical leftist actors did not take up arms, but they often supported the revolutionary left and embraced violent tactics, and they were indifferent to liberal democracy.

Even under otherwise favorable circumstances, it is difficult for democracy to survive massive leftist collective violence that generates a wide sense of fear and anxiety. Under democracy, left-wing widescale kidnappings, property seizures and factory occupations (with some frequency accompanied by taking hostages), wildcat strikes, bombings, violent attacks on property, and politically motivated assassinations usually engender a right-wing counter response that can undermine democracy. Few democracies have survived a radical leftist threat as deep as that posed by the Argentine left from 1973 to 1976. Again, this is not because the revolutionary left had any chance of taking power, but it did pose a real threat to life and property. The extreme right-wing and left-wing mobilization in Argentina during those years, and the ruthless and sanguinary war each side waged against the other, have similarities to what occurred during Weimar Germany and the Spanish Republic of 1931-36 – and, with far fewer assassinations, in Chile from the late 1960s until the 1973 coup.

Assassinations and kidnappings carried out by the extreme right outpaced the number carried out by the left. Based on the newspaper accounts that generated her database, Moyano reported 1165 assassinations, 458 kidnappings, and 264 bombings carried out by the right between Campora’s inauguration and the March 24, 1976 coup.⁶¹ Table 1 shows comparative data on violent acts

⁶⁰ *Argentina’s Lost Patrol*, 72.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

committed by the guerrillas, collective actors, and right-wing actors.⁶² Even though Buenos Aires newspapers could not have counted all violent politically motivated actions, Table 1 provides a glimpse of the extraordinary turmoil that afflicted Argentina: in just 34 months, 107 episodes in which the guerrillas stole arms, 390 attacks on property, 445 buildings seized (often factories or university buildings), 1205 bombings, 647 kidnappings, and 1688 politically motivated assassinations.

Table 1: Violent Acts by Kind of Actor, May 25, 1973 to March 24, 1976

	Guerrilla operations	Collective violent protest	Right-wing violence	Total
Theft of arms	107	-	-	107
Attacks on property	251	75	64	390
Seizures of buildings	143	265	37	445
Bombings	812	129	264	1205
Kidnappings	140	49	458	647
Hijackings (airplanes)	1	-	-	1
Deaths	481	42	1165	1688
Total	1935	560	1988	4483

⁶² As noted earlier, Franco provides a significantly higher estimate of assassinations carried out by the AAA—2000. “La ‘seguridad nacional’ como política estatal en la Argentina de los años setenta,” 865.

Violence by the left and right generated deep public insecurity and a sense of Hobbesian chaos. By the end of 1975, 200 security companies had sprouted to offer business executives and others private protection services just in the Federal Capital.⁶³ After Cámpora's inauguration, right-wing violence did not seize the Argentine imaginary as much as the leftist violence; most of the establishment supported the right-wing assassination campaign. Nevertheless, through its campaign of terror against the left, the extremist right undermined democracy well before the March 1976 coup. Until the revolutionary left was defeated, right-wing terrorism fueled left-wing terrorism; the revolutionary left hardened its positions in response to right-wing terrorism.

In the media, the discourse about a subversive threat became ubiquitous.⁶⁴ Although data on homicides capture only a small part of the perceived subversive threat, there was a sharp increase in violent crime in the final year of the 1966-73 military dictatorship and the democratic period. In the province of Buenos Aires, the only for which data are available in this source, the homicide rate increased from 7.6 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1969 to 14.2 in 1974, the last year for which Waldmann presents data – an increase of 87%.⁶⁵ During those years, for purposes of comparison, Germany and France had homicide rates of 1.2 and 0.8 per 100,000, respectively.⁶⁶ The incidence of serious injuries caused by attacks also increased, from 19.6 to 26.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, an increase of 33%.⁶⁷

Labor unrest, kidnappings of business executives, strikes, factory takeovers, and high labor absentee rates were chronic, adding to the sense of widespread chaos. Elizabeth Jelin notes that labor conflict was so intense that FIAT closed its plant that produced railroad equipment because of the “lack of order, authority, and security.”⁶⁸ The guerrillas were militarily severely weakened before the March 1976 coup, but in the right-wing and centrist imaginary, the leftist threat remained real,⁶⁹ and the government seemed incapable of establishing order and of governing.

If the government had been competent in other spheres such as economic policy, and if some core actors (especially the presidents and government) had been committed to democracy, the regime probably could have defeated the leftist

⁶³ Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón*, 213-214.

⁶⁴ Franco, “La ‘seguridad nacional’ como política estatal en la Argentina de los años setenta.”

⁶⁵ “Anomia social y violencia,” 216.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ “Conflictos laborales en la Argentina,” 449.

⁶⁹ Moyano argues – against conventional wisdom – that the revolutionary left was not militarily defeated until after the coup. *Argentina's Lost Patrol*.

threat without succumbing to a coup and without resorting to massive human rights violations. But powerful extremist anti-democratic actors posed a stiff challenge.

Government Ineptitude and the Economic Crisis

A substantial literature indicates that poor economic performance can sink new democracies.⁷⁰ In Argentina, it was not an economic crisis per se as the widespread belief that government ineptitude had caused it and, after July 1975, that the government was completely incapable of resolving it that contributed to the breakdown.

From the outset in 1973, economic policies were highly statist, nationalist, ill-conceived, and incoherent.⁷¹ The Cámpora government took office at a favorable expansionary moment for the Argentine economy, albeit with inflation running slightly above 100%. The Social Pact, the economic plan established during the early days of Cámpora's government, was designed to achieve economic and labor stability and increase real wages and growth. Labor agreed to not negotiate new contracts for two years in exchange for significant wage increases (20%) and an agreement that business would freeze prices. The Social Pact produced a drop in inflation and other short-term successes.⁷² However, across-the-board 20% wage increases without allowing for compensatory price increases are usually not viable in modern economies under democratic regimes. The success of the plan rested on effective state monitoring of prices and wages and on stability in import and export prices so as not to upset the internal balance of prices and to maintain an equilibrium in the balance of payments. This is an extraordinarily unlikely proposition in a complex modern economy. Constant labor pressures for wage increases and other concessions, business maneuvering for higher prices, and a major disruption in import prices with the oil crisis of 1973-74 made the plan unviable.

⁷⁰ Mark J. Gasiorowski, "Economic Crisis and Political Regime Change: An Event History Analysis," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 4 (1995): 882-97.

⁷¹ Roberto L. Ayres, "The 'Social Pact' as Anti-Inflationary Policy: The Argentine Experience Since 1973," *World Politics* 28, no. 4 (1976): 473-501.

⁷² Adolfo Canitrot, "La viabilidad económica de la democracia: Un análisis de la experiencia peronista, 1973-1976," *Estudios Sociales* #11, May 1978. Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad (CEDES), Buenos Aires; Pablo Gerchunoff and Lucas Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión y el desencanto: un siglo de políticas económicas argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2010), 344-345.

Oil prices quadrupled between October 1973 and February 1974, creating a massive external imbalance. Argentina's terms of trade deteriorated sharply; using 1970 as an index = 100, the index fell from 120.2 in the second quarter of 1973 to 65.0 in the second quarter of 1974.⁷³ Perón tried to compensate for the increase in import prices by subsidizing some imports, but this measure added to the escalating fiscal deficit.⁷⁴ Because of the price controls, firms began withholding some products from the market.⁷⁵ Exacerbating the effects of the oil crisis, in July 1974, European markets suspended the import of Argentine beef. By March 1974, for all practical purposes, the Social Pact collapsed when Perón decreed a new wage increase of 13%, with a 30% increase in the minimum wage.⁷⁶ With these wage increases, the government hoped to regain labor peace at a time of radical labor demands. But predictably, these increases were soon eroded by inflation. Perón seemed to expect that massive state intervention in setting wages and prices would lead to labor peace, but it had the opposite effect: it made government decisions about prices and wages highly politicized and conflictual. In November 1974, labor won another 15% wage increase. With the Social Pact imploded and inflation on the rise, José Gelbard resigned as the Minister of the Economy in November 1974.

An overvalued and fixed exchange rate, with multiple exchange rates for different purposes, led to trade imbalances, frequent runs against the Argentine currency, and a raging black market for the dollar. In 1974 and 1975, on average, the black market rate for the dollar was more than three times higher the official commercial exchange rate, and at times it was as much as 4.7 times higher.⁷⁷ In US dollars, exports increased by 20.4% in 1974, but imports increased by 62.6%. In 1975, exports plummeted by 24.7% while imports increased by another 8.6%.⁷⁸ The overvalued exchange rate generated disincentives for exports, protected inefficient sectors of national industry, and led to high internal prices for many products, thereby weakening the competitive capacity of domestic producers. After growing rapidly from 1968-74, GNP fell by 1.3% in 1975 and 2.9% in 1976 (and per capita GNP fell more).⁷⁹ The fiscal deficit exploded in 1975 when public

⁷³ Canitrot, "La viabilidad económica de la democracia", 28, Figure 8.

⁷⁴ Canitrot, "La viabilidad económica de la democracia"; Torre, *Los sindicatos en el gobierno, 1973-1976*.

⁷⁵ De Riz, *Retorno y derrumbe* (2nd ed.), 140-141; Torre, *Los sindicatos en el gobierno*.

⁷⁶ Jelin, "Conflictos laborales en la Argentina," 434; Torre, *Los sindicatos en el gobierno*.

⁷⁷ Guido Di Tella, *Argentina under Perón, 1973-76: The Nation's Experience with a Labour-based Government* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1983), Table 8.2, 222-223.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Table A.4.1, 216-217; Gary W. Wynia, "Argentina in the Postwar Era: Politics and Economic Policy Making in a Divided Society" (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 227.

⁷⁹ Di Tella, *Argentina under Perón*, Table A.1.1, 210-211).

sector expenditures reached 41.7% of GNP compared to 25.7% of GNP for revenue.⁸⁰

A new restrictive and nationalist Law of Foreign Investments crushed international enthusiasm for investing in Argentina. State regulations, increasing taxes, at times increasing real wages, escalating inflation, and a highly uncertain investment climate because of terrorism, frequent kidnappings of business executives, labor militancy, and erratic policy-making depressed investment.⁸¹ Occasional devaluations to address the external imbalances generated inflation and eroded real wages. Union power was at its height, and the unions often successfully pushed the government into granting wage increases even when inflationary pressures were severe. Extensive price controls led to shortages of some goods and dampened investment. To address imbalances, the government relaxed price controls, but unions then insisted on wage increases to compensate for the higher prices.

To protect real wages, public sector prices were kept at low levels, generating huge public sector deficits and adding to the inflationary pressures. On top of these ill-conceived economic policies, frequent kidnappings and assassinations of business executives by the guerrillas, constant labor conflicts including factory takeovers, and chronic high levels of social conflict and mobilization made for an abysmal business climate. The government frequently undermined its own economic policy makers by granting new wage concessions or through other policies.

The economic crisis spiraled out of control in June 1975 as Economic Minister Alfredo Gómez Morales (October 21, 1974 to June 2, 1975) resigned in response to being undermined by a new wage increase of 38%.⁸² His successor, Celestino Rodrigo, tried to implement an orthodox stabilization plan. He devalued the currency by 100%, increased prices for most public sector goods including gas by 181%,⁸³ and attempted to jettison the failed price controls. Grass roots labor protests broke out across Argentina's main cities. The CGT organized a massive general strike on July 7-8, 1975 – the first ever against a Peronist government. The general strike paralyzed the country, led to López Rega's and Celestino Rodrigo's downfalls, and won huge (from 60% to 200%) but completely unsustainable wage

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Table A.1.7, 235.

⁸¹ Ayres, "The 'Social Pact' as Anti-Inflationary Policy"; Di Tella, *Argentina under Perón*, Table A.1.2, 212-213.

⁸² De Riz, "De la movilización popular al aniquilamiento (1973-1976)." In *Argentina, 1976: Estudios en torno al golpe de estado*, ed. Clara E. Lida, Horacio Crespo, and Pablo Yankelevich, (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2007): 35-58, 50.

⁸³ Mario Rapoport, *Historia económica, política y social de la Argentina (1880-2000)* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Macchi, 2000), 700-701.

increases. On average, real wages increased by almost 60% in June 1975.⁸⁴ The CGT had inflicted a temporary defeat on the right-wing sectors of Peronism. López Rega was expelled from Argentina on July 19, 1975. However, labor's victory was Pyrrhic; the wage increases unleashed hyperinflation. The increase in the consumer price index in July 1975 was 34.7%⁸⁵ – an annualized inflation rate of 3468%, anticipating the Latin American hyperinflations of the 1980s. The economic crisis and the government's incoherent response fueled the rising tide against the democratic regime.⁸⁶ Pedro Bonnani replaced Celestino Rodrigo on July 22, but he fell three weeks later because of labor pressures, resigning on August 11, 1975. Antonio Cafiero, the fifth Minister of the Economy since the democratic transition, replaced Bonnani, but he, too, was unable to secure labor peace. After the massive increases of June 1975, real wages fell sharply, declining about 60% from June 1975 to March 1976.⁸⁷

Faced with an economy in shambles, Cafiero resigned on February 3, 1976, replaced by Emilio Mondelli. On February 16, APEGE led a highly publicized and effective business lockout that was widely interpreted as coup mongering. According to Ricardo Sidicaro,⁸⁸ 1200 business associations joined the lockout. Inflation again raged out of control; the increase in consumer prices averaged 38.0% in March 1976,⁸⁹ which would be 4670% on an annualized basis. For the year that ended March 31, 1976, inflation was 566%.⁹⁰

Democracies can survive deep economic crises. But in a context of extremist actors and weak commitments to democracy, the Argentine economic crisis contributed to defections from the democratic coalition and accretions to the coup coalition. Government ineptitude in economic policy helped convince the expanding coup coalition that, in addition to the leftist threat, there was a power vacuum that could not be solved within the confines of democracy.

Lack of commitment to democracy

In his classic 1971 book, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Robert Dahl argued that elites' commitment to democracy was an important variable in

⁸⁴ Di Tella, *Argentina under Perón, 1973-76*, Table A.16, 234.

⁸⁵ De Riz, *Retorno y derrumbe*, 128.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 124-129.

⁸⁷ Di Tella, *Argentina Under Perón.*, Table A.16, 234.

⁸⁸ *Los tres peronismos: estado y poder económico 1946-1955, 1973-1976, 1989-1999* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores Argentina, 2002), 137-138.

⁸⁹ Di Tella, *Argentina under Perón, 1973-1976*, Table A.2, 214.

⁹⁰ Novaro and Palermo, *La dictadura militar, 1976-1983*, 17.

sustaining democracy, or in failing to sustain it. Dahl cited Argentina as a leading example of a country with many favorable conditions for democracy, yet that had gone through repeated democratic failures. He argued that elites' lack of commitment to democracy was an important reason for the failure of democracy in Argentina. Dahl's argument helps shed light on the 1976 breakdown.

From 1973 to 1976, several powerful actors worked for or supported the destruction of democracy, and most others were indifferent. The fact that no major actors except the UCR were normatively committed to democracy helped sink the regime.⁹¹ Even programmatically non-radical actors did little or nothing to defend democracy.

The hostility of some powerful actors toward liberal democracy and the indifference of most of the rest from 1973-76 continued the sad legacy that Dahl mentioned in his analysis of Argentina. The revolutionary left's activities destabilized democracy. After an initial period of restraint, the revolutionary left treated the semi-democratic regime as if it were the same as the antecedent dictatorship. The revolutionary and combative sectors of the labor movement employed violence against physical property and seized factories on a regular basis. The extremist right undermined democracy through massive human rights abuses, and then it sabotaged democracy through a military coup.

Even most actors that did not have extremist policy agendas did little or nothing to protect democracy. Juan Perón, the moderate sectors of the labor movement, and the Peronist Party could have done much more to safeguard democracy. Unlike the extremist actors, Perón, the labor moderates, and the Peronist Party moderates were not normatively opposed to democracy. However, neither their discourse nor their behavior expressed a commitment to preserving democracy. If they had been normatively committed to democracy, different behavior might have led to a more favorable outcome for the regime.

In 1973-74, Perón was less authoritarian than he had been from 1946-55, but he was still no steadfast democrat. He made four decisions that were highly damaging to democracy. In 1972, he pointedly refused to repudiate the armed revolutionary left even after the country was moving toward democratic elections. "People have been pressuring me to make statements against violence, but ... the full blame for this violence falls on the dictatorship ... For every person that the

⁹¹ A normative commitment to democracy means that actors value democracy because of its intrinsic procedural properties and protections—the guarantee of free and fair elections, full suffrage rights, and civil liberties and political rights—rather than for strictly instrumental purposes or because of the substantive outcomes it produces.

Montoneros have killed, the military dictatorship has killed 100.” As María Ollier summarized, “Perón legitimated, clearly and plainly, armed violence.”⁹²

Until 1974, Perón had great credibility among most of the Argentine left, so his decision to legitimize revolutionary violence had an impact. Legitimizing the left’s violence against the dictatorship in 1972-73 when a transition to democracy was under way made it difficult for Perón to tame its violence after the transition to democracy. By the time Perón definitively broke with the Montoneros on May 1, 1974, he had lost his ability to rein in the revolutionary left. Given his influence among most of the Argentine left in the 1960s and 1970s, it is likely that if he had not explicitly supported violent actions and the Peronist revolutionary left during the transition to democracy (1972-73), there would have been less revolutionary fervor and therefore a less destructive impact on democracy.

Second, after he took office, Perón supported López Rega as the latter created the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance (AAA) to combat the left.⁹³ Thus, Perón was responsible for allowing the creation and expansion of right-wing death squads. The right-wing death squads directly undermined democracy and contributed to the spiral of violence and extreme polarization that plagued Argentina during the 1973-76 period. In this and other ways, Perón was complicit as right-wing actors undermined democracy. If he had not supported the expansion and violence of the extremist left and the extremist right, democracy might have stood a chance.

Third, Perón’s decision to allow his wife to be the vice-presidential candidate proved deeply destructive. Perón was 77 years old and not in good health when he assumed the presidency. Choosing a vice-president who had the potential to be a good successor was a paramount democratic responsibility. He enjoyed unassailable prestige within Peronist ranks, so he could have chosen a capable running mate without incurring a cost. Isabel Perón had a fifth-grade education and was wholly unqualified to become president. In 1973, she was a convenient way for Perón to maintain his unwieldy coalition intact; nobody dared challenge his choice. His decision was also a product of his preference for a loyalist inner circle. As president, Isabel was grossly incompetent. She consistently supported López Rega until his ouster in July 1975. Without gaining support on the right, she alienated the Peronist left and center and virtually the entire non-Peronist establishment. She wavered incoherently between supporting finance ministers who attempted to stabilize the economy and giving in to labor demands

⁹² *El fenómeno insurreccional y la cultura política (1969–1973)* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1986), 146.

⁹³ De Riz, *La política en suspenso, 1966/1976* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2000), 148-153.

for huge wage increases. Democracy would have stood a better chance with a competent president.

Finally, from the outset, Perón opted for ill-advised, incoherent economic policies. Many business sectors and most of Argentine society were willing to give democracy a chance. When the government wavered incoherently between stabilization policies and massive wage increases, when businesses and citizens experienced the uncertainty generated by erratic and incoherent policies, when they faced deep economic losses and a downward economic spiral, and when they saw constant turmoil and fear produced (in their view) by the revolutionary and radical left, they defected.

If labor unions had been committed to democracy, they would have made different choices that would have had less destructive economic consequences and less pernicious political ones. Most labor leaders displayed complete indifference to democracy. Even at the expense of contributing to an inflationary spiral that eroded real wages, they fought relentlessly for higher wages, more political power, and more control over government policy.⁹⁴ Even though their actions added to the sense of chaos and disorder, the radical leaders and bases pressed for factory takeovers and strikes. Their goal was labor power and radical social change or revolution. Even if it meant degrading the regime, conservative union leaders supported the assassinations and removals of their radical competitors.

Admittedly, many union leaders were under pressure from radicalized bases during the 1973-76 period. This situation reduced their ability to prioritize democracy over short term economic interests (demanding constant wage increases). A few union leaders resisted these short term and narrow temptations and attempted to work for a democratic solution. In October 1975, UOM leader Victorio Calabró, who became the governor of Buenos Aires (he replaced Oscar Bidegaín in January 1974 when Perón pushed the latter to resign) joined a coalition that hoped to convince Isabel to resign. However, orthodox Peronists and Isabel Perón defeated this attempt. Calabró was expelled from the party in November 1975 and removed as governor the following month. The Argentine experience of 1983-89, when workers suffered great material setbacks but fought valiantly to defend democracy, showed that labor is sometimes willing to prioritize democracy. Organized labor bears some responsibility for the 1976 breakdown—although certainly less than the revolutionary left and the reactionary right.

Likewise, Peronist politicians thwarted plausible steps to salvage democracy. Some Peronist leaders in congress defected to the opposition after the hyperinflation and growing sense of a power vacuum in July 1975. Led by Ítalo Luder, this group hoped to convince Isabel Perón to resign when she took her

⁹⁴ Torre, *Los sindicatos en el gobierno, 1973-1976*.

leave in September 1975. She agreed to move the elections up from 1977 to October 17, 1976, but with the support of the “verticalist” labor leaders (led by Lorenzo Miguel) and eleven Peronist governors (led by Carlos Menem of La Rioja, later president of Argentina from 1989 to 1999), she blocked the effort to remove her. The verticalist labor leaders and governors were more interested in preserving their positions than in saving democracy.⁹⁵ The small core of actors that were committed to democracy – the UCR and a small part of the Peronist Party – were not able to find a democratic way of replacing Isabel.

By October 1975 it would have been difficult to rescue democracy even with a competent president, but the Peronist factions headed by Luder might have had a chance in tandem with the UCR and moderate labor leaders. They might have been able to overcome the vacuum of power and massive cynicism and lack of confidence that beset a feeble, incompetent, and increasingly authoritarian president. With Isabel restored in the presidency, the fate of democracy was more or less sealed.

Only one main actor, the centrist Radical Party (UCR), embraced liberal democracy. The Radicals remained generally true to democratic practices and attitudes until the final agony of the regime in March 1976.⁹⁶ The UCR denounced growing human rights abuses, but it had limited popular support. Its presidential candidate won only 21% of the vote in the March 1973 presidential election and 24% in the September 1973 election, and the party captured only 51 of 245 seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 1973. As violence overwhelmed politics, it became a less central player, and its voice was drowned out in the cacophony of violence.

Although it is analytically useful to conceptualize extremist actors, the weakness of actors committed to democracy, and governmental incompetence and bad policy results as separate factors that contributed to the breakdown, these three factors interacted. For example, because he was not a true democrat, Perón nurtured the extremist anti-system left and then supported the creation of the right-wing death squads that helped undermine democracy. Likewise, government ineptitude and the sense of a power vacuum and chaos reinforced anti-democratic actors.

The 1976 breakdown differed significantly from the breakdowns of 1951/55, 1962 and 1966. In the earlier breakdowns, the deep antipathy between Peronists and Radicals, the electoral hegemony of the Peronists coupled with the steadfast refusal of the military and conservative establishment to allow the Peronists to run after 1955, the Peronists’ mobilization against successive regimes

⁹⁵ Ibid., 144.

⁹⁶ Acuña, *De Frondizi a Alfonsín: La tradición política del radicalismo*, 208; De Riz, *Retorno y derrumbe* (2nd ed.), 154; De Riz, *La política en suspenso, 1966/1976*, 179.

including the semi-democratic regimes of 1958-62 and 1963-66, frequent divisions within the armed forces, and widespread societal opposition to the authoritarian regimes were central.⁹⁷ The 1970 rapprochement between Peronists and Radicals and the end of the proscription of the Peronists ended this earlier source of democratic instability. The emergence of a powerful revolutionary left and the radicalization of parts of the labor movement and student movement, coupled with the strengthening of a more virulently authoritarian and violent right-wing, also made the 1976 breakdown very different from the previous ones. Governmental incompetence and a widespread sense of social and political chaos and a power vacuum were crucial elements in the 1976 breakdown, more so than in the earlier breakdowns.

One common element to all four breakdowns between 1951 and 1976 was that for an extended time in Argentine history, almost no actors valued democracy more than instrumental substantive outcomes. When substantive outcomes are bad, as almost inevitably happens from time to time, democracy easily becomes vulnerable if no actors defend it on normative grounds.

Evaluating Explanations for the Breakdown

How can we be confident that these three explanations are valid—indeed, that they might constitute the best explanations for the breakdown? One reason is that some social scientists and historians implicitly agree the first two explanations are valid and important.⁹⁸ Although social scientists' and historians' implicit agreement does not prove that an explanation is correct, it increases the confidence that it is.

Another is what leading actors themselves said at the time and after the coup. The actors that supported the 1976 coup consistently explained their support based on the threats, the sense of chaos, fear, and uncertainty generated by radical actors and based on governmental incompetence, the sense of a vacuum of power, and the economic and public security crises. Actors are not always aware of the motivations for their behavior, and they sometimes use discourse strategically or instrumentally to disguise their true motivations. However, in this case, the actors that supported the coup had no obvious reason to dissemble. Moreover, the sequence of events supports the argument that leftist radicalism and the deep

⁹⁷ Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: Institute for International Studies, University of California, 1973); O'Donnell, *El estado burocrático autoritario*.

⁹⁸ De Riz, *Retorno y derrumbe*; De Riz, *La política en suspenso*; Viola, *Democracia e Autoritarismo na Argentina Contemporânea*.

economic and public security crisis fueled growing support for an authoritarian right-wing reaction. As noted above, the authoritarian right-wing reaction began in 1973, and it intensified over time as the guerrilla grew and as radical labor protest continued. The severe economic crisis also generated growing opposition to the democratic regime.

Hence, it is useful to document how actors explained their positions and their support for the coup. In December 1975, the APEGE (which represented business associations) issued a statement decrying the “lack of authority, and absence of security and order in which Argentines live.”⁹⁹ On January 21, 1976, APEGE stated that “The systematic persecution (of business interests), whether through the system of price controls, through labor conflicts and threats that stem from the constant increase of unions’ power, through the excessive tax burden ... are parts of a perfectly structured plan to reach our gradual and inexorable annihilation.”¹⁰⁰

APEGE and other business associations began issuing thinly veiled calls for coups on the grounds that the government of Isabel Perón was incapable of resolving the economic crisis and the subversive threat. On March 10, 1976, APEGE denounced the “corruption, lack of security for people and goods, and the generalized social chaos... The efforts and sacrifice of life of our army forces and security forces are worth little if they must fight against the counterweight of policies that foster the causes of subversive delinquency. ... Some Argentines are not willing to remain passive in the face of the destruction of their country. The path must be corrected in a clear and definitive way.”¹⁰¹

On March 20, 1976, the Federation of Entrepreneurs of Buenos Aires (Federación de Empresarios de Buenos Aires, FEBA) warned that, “The crisis that affects our country has reached its limits. ... Nobody expects anything from a regime (“sistema de poder”) that has not and does not have any answer that would enable us to resolve the dramatic situation that overwhelms us. ... The blindness,

⁹⁹ Quoted in Gonzalo Sanz Cerbino, “El huevo de la serpiente. La Asamblea Permanente de Entidades Gremiales Empresarias y el golpe de estado de 1976.” *Realidad Económica* 251 (2010): 7-28, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Horacio Raúl Bustingorry, “Historia de APEGE. La huelga patronal del 16 de febrero de 1976.” Paper presented at the XI Symposium of History departments, University of Tucumán, Argentina. Quoting *La Nación*, January 22, 1976, 9.

¹⁰¹ Quote in Verónica Baudino and Gonzalo Sanz Cerbino, “Las corporaciones agrarias e industriales frente al golpe del ‘76: apuntes para la reconstrucción de la fuerza social contrarrevolucionaria.” Young Researchers’ Working Paper No. 30. (2011) Gino Germani Institute, University of Buenos Aires, 131-132. Accessed January 2019. <http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/Argentina/iigg-uba/20120302023339/dji30.pdf>.

lack of capacity, and immorality of our leaders ... have unleashed this chaos."¹⁰² That same day, CARBAP warned that "nobody will be surprised if the government or the legislative, political, entrepreneurial, or union institutions disappear, crushed by the weight of their own incapacity or failure to operate."¹⁰³ A right-wing party, Nueva Fuerza (New Force), echoed these themes, declaring just before the coup that it was imminent because of the economic chaos, corruption, and "total decadence."¹⁰⁴

In an analysis of the attitudes of a major Argentine newspaper, *Clarín*, about the coup, Micaela Iturralde wrote that "In the months leading up to the coup, *Clarín's* characterization of the national situation in terms of 'chaos' and 'national crisis,' went along with its equally positive assessment of the armed forces as the necessary guarantors of 'order' and 'national security,' in the light of the violence unleashed by the armed organizations."¹⁰⁵

In their March 24, 1976 proclamation after seizing power, the generals explained their motivation. "Faced with a tremendous power vacuum that could have plunged us into dissolution and anarchy; ... the lack of a global strategy ... to confront subversion; the lack of solutions for the country; ... the manifest irresponsibility of the management of the economy... the Armed Forces ... have assumed leadership of the state. ... This decision has an objective of ending the power vacuum (el desgobierno), corruption, and the subversive scourge."¹⁰⁶ Six days later, in a speech on March 30, 1976, President Jorge Videla repeated these themes. "The intervention of the armed forces was the only possible alternative given the deterioration provoked by the power vacuum (el desgobierno), corruption, and complacency. ... We have never experienced such disorder."¹⁰⁷

Even some Peronist leaders expressed support for the coup for similar reasons. Jorge Paladino, who served as Secretary General of the National

¹⁰² Sanz Cerbino, "El huevo de la serpiente," 27-28.

¹⁰³ Cited in Baudino and Sanz Cerbino, "Las corporaciones agrarias e industriales frente al golpe del '76," 132.

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Rapoport, *Historia económica, política y social de la Argentina (1880-2000)*, 679.

¹⁰⁵ "El diario Clarín y la construcción discursiva del golpe de Estado de marzo de 1976 en Argentina," *Quórum Académico* 10, no. 2 (2013): 199-223.

¹⁰⁶ Jorge R. Videla, Emilio Massera, and Orlando Agosti, "Proclama del 24 de marzo de 1976" (1976). Accessed January 2019. <http://servicios.abc.gov.ar/docentes/efemerides/24marzo/htmls/decadas/descarga/proclama.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Jorge Videla, "Discurso pronunciado el día 30 de marzo de 1976 por el Excelentísimo Señor Presidente de la Nación, teniente general Jorge Rafael Videla al asumir la Primera Magistratura de la República Argentina." In *Mensajes presidenciales: Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, 24 de marzo de 1976*, Vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Imprenta del Congreso de la Nación Argentina, 1977), 7-8.

Justicialist Movement from 1968 to 1972, later stated that “With the coup, the Armed Forces did nothing more than accept a request that they confront a survival crisis of the nation that the formal institutions and civic organizations had proven incapable of and impotent to resolve. You can’t even claim that the military overthrew a government. The state had been acephalous since July 1, 1974.”¹⁰⁸ As Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo wrote, “society was bankrupt and desperate to end the situation of chaos.”¹⁰⁹

Many powerful actors expressed their support for the military takeover because of their perception of a radical left threat and a profound economic and security crisis. In April 1976, the head of CARBAP, Jorge Aguado, declared that the military had taken power “to impede the continuation of a government that, because of its own incapacity and immorality, had plunged the country in a profound social, economic, and political crisis.”¹¹⁰ In a September 1976 publication, the country’s most traditional and powerful association of landowners, the Argentine Rural Society (Sociedad Rural Argentina), stated that “During the 1975-76 period, the country experienced perhaps its greatest social, political, and economic convulsion since the period of national organization. This turmoil, the product of a demagogic and populist regime, nearly brought the country to its dissolution. This disgraceful outcome was avoided thanks to the military intervention of March 24.”¹¹¹

A year after the coup, the Confederation of Rural Associations of the Rosafé Zone¹¹² (Confederación de Asociaciones Rurales de la Zona Rosafé, CARZOR) also invoked a sense of chaos and a subversive threat for supporting the military intervention. “When the armed forces took over the government on March 24, 1976, a sensation of hopeful faith was manifest in the Argentine citizenry. One year later, it is apparent how much has been achieved for the country’s good.” Along similar lines, the Argentine Rural Society exalted, “The struggle against subversion has been carried out with high valor and growing success... The actions that will lead Argentina to a destiny of order, progress, and happiness have been carried out.”

The discourse from establishment actors ignores the right’s complicity in the breakdown. The steep degeneration of democracy as manifested in massive human rights abuses, the coup against a democratically elected governor and the

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Novaro and Palermo, *La dictadura militar, 1976-1983*, 24.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹⁰ Cited in Baudino and Sanz Cerbino, “Las corporaciones agrarias e industriales frente al golpe del ’76,” 146.

¹¹¹ Cited in Sidicaro, *Los tres peronismos*, 141-142.

¹¹² The Rosafé Zone is a highly productive agricultural area that includes the farmland outside of two major cities in the province of Santa Fe: Rosario and Santa Fe.

democratically dubious removals of several other governors, the growing power of paramilitary death squads, and the increasing political involvement of the military were the result of authoritarian right-wing actors.

The argument about actors' normative commitments has a different status in the logic of explanation. It is based on a counterfactual, namely, that if some programmatically moderate powerful actors had been normatively committed to democracy, they would have taken different steps that could have averted the democratic breakdown. I focused on the non-radical actors because the anti-system actors were committed to the destruction of democracy, whereas the programmatically moderate actors were not. Of course, it is difficult to definitively adjudicate explanations based on counterfactuals.

The Argentine Breakdown and Theories of Democratization

The Argentine experience of 1973-76 helps illuminate the four theoretical points about democratization that I elaborated in the third section of this chapter. First, to understand breakdowns, we need to examine specific actors rather than primarily invoking structural or cultural conditions. Although in most historical periods, the chances of democratic survival have been better in wealthier countries, the Argentine breakdowns of 1951, 1962, 1966, and especially 1976 show that democracies sometimes fail despite auspicious structural conditions. A fairly high standard of living and moderate inequality did not inoculate democracy.

Argentina had perhaps the most powerful labor movement in Latin America. According to Dietrich Rueschemeyer et al., a powerful organized working class should be good for democracy.¹¹³ Yet organized labor had an instrumental attitude toward democracy and supported Perón, who used democratic elections to come to power but then ran roughshod over it. Democracy was a means toward institutional power for labor leaders, and for wage growth and social benefits for workers if Perón was in office. Under these circumstances, a powerful organized labor movement was a hindrance to democracy.

Second, the Argentine breakdown of 1976 underscores that it is useful to focus the analysis on concrete historical actors—presidents and organizations—rather than conceptualizing the actors as social classes or the “rich” “middle classes,” and “poor.” In Argentina, the key actors except for organized labor and business associations—the leftist revolutionaries, the presidents, the military, the right-wing death squads, and the two largest parties—cannot readily be analyzed

¹¹³ Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

in class terms. Moreover, organized labor was deeply divided from 1973 to 1976 along ideological lines, in ways that could not be predicted on the basis of the economic activities of the different sectors of the working class. Organized business was also divided until around the time of Peron's death.

In Argentina from 1973-76, we cannot understand regime dynamics along such simple lines. In May 1973, when democracy began, most poor and middle-class people supported the new regime. By March 1976, most poor, middle class, and rich people opposed it. To understand regime dynamics, we need to study organizational actors and presidents, not the rich and poor. The cleavage lines regarding policy positions and the political regime were complex.

In Argentina, from 1968 to 1977, one of the most important actors was leftist revolutionaries. Revolutionary groups claimed to act on behalf of the people, workers, or the poor, but there was a chasm between the revolutionary left and the people on whose behalf they purported to act.¹¹⁴ After the transition to democracy in 1973, most labor leaders repudiated the revolutionary left, and there is a widespread perception that common citizens did as well. Likewise, although the Argentine military implemented a far right-wing agenda after it seized power in March 1976, it would be facile to generally reduce the military to an instrument of class interests.¹¹⁵ Some military regimes (for example, Peru from 1968 to 1975 and Portugal from 1974 to 1975) have implemented a leftist policy agenda. Rather than treating militaries as expressions of class interests, social scientists and historians need to examine the identities and institutional interests of the armed forces.¹¹⁶ Likewise, it is usually excessively simplistic to treat political parties and churches as expressions of class interests. In sum, to comprehend regime dynamics, we need to study organizational actors and presidents, not the rich and poor (or the middle classes) as more or less unitary actors.

Third, the Argentine case shows that battles over income distribution are not always the defining issue of democratic politics.¹¹⁷ In Argentina, during this time, battles over income distribution *were* important, but extremism on the right and left and governmental incompetence were more important. When the new government implemented the Social Pact in 1973, many business leaders

¹¹⁴ Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón*; Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol*.

¹¹⁵ Dan Slater, Benjamin Smith, and Gautam Nair, "Economic Origins of Democratic Breakdown? The Redistributive Model and the Postcolonial State," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (2014): 353-74.

¹¹⁶ Alfred Stepan, *The Military in Politics: Changing Patterns in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

¹¹⁷ Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *Dictators and Democrats: Masses, Elites, and Regime Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 219-300; Slater, Smith, and Nair, "Economic Origins of Democratic Breakdown?"

grumbled, but they were willing to absorb higher labor costs if it won them labor peace and social peace. When the economy grew in 1973 and early 1974, businesses could fare well enough with some redistribution. Redistribution became a major conflict only when the economy started to experience deep problems and the security situation unraveled. Actors increasingly opposed the political regime on the grounds of governmental incompetence, a power void, widespread political violence, and massive social and political convulsions. These issues had far more weight for most actors than conflicts over routine redistribution.

In one superficial respect, the Argentine breakdown of 1976 conforms to Acemoglu and Robinson and Boix's expectations: until late 1975, most labor leaders continued to support Isabel Perón's government and for this reason largely abided by the democratic regime, and most business interests and the wealthy applauded the March 24, 1976 coup. However, the logic of the actors in Argentina largely contradicts the expectations of these two works. Business and the wealthy applauded the coup despite the fact that economic policy and results veered sharply against labor after July 1975; the process of turning Argentina from Latin America's most even society into a much more unequal society started during Isabel Perón's government. Income distribution, which is central to Acemoglu and Robinson's and Boix's accounts of why different classes support democracy or dictatorship, mispredicts actors' positions in Argentina at the time of the breakdown in 1976.

For most actors, a more important issue in Argentina from 1973-76 revolved around a basic Hobbesian or Huntingtonian¹¹⁸ question: how to secure peace and order. The period witnessed tremendous social convulsions and constant political violence. The left-wing extremist actors posed an existential threat to establishment actors, especially the military, the police, business leaders, "verticalist" union leaders, and the Church. Right-wing extremists killed leftists and leftist sympathizers in large numbers, and the government removed leftists and sympathizers from their positions in government, labor unions, and universities—and often imprisoned them. This, and the ubiquitous sense that there was a power vacuum and that Isabel Perón's government was grossly ill-equipped to resolve any of the country's problems, were far more important in the breakdown of democracy than battles over income distribution.

Finally, the Argentine experience of 1973-76 underscores the problematic nature of the essentialist position that the working class is consistently pro-democratic¹¹⁹ and that the poor are consistently-democratic if revolution is not

¹¹⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

¹¹⁹ Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.

viable.¹²⁰ In Argentina, no major faction of the labor movement was committed to liberal democracy between the late 1940s and 1976. Organized labor supported the democratic transition in 1973, but its support for democracy as a regime type was instrumental. The bureaucratic “verticalist” labor leaders supported the democratic transition as a way of gaining political power and winning economic concessions for workers; they were indifferent to democracy. Radical labor leaders wanted radical change, not democracy.

Whereas for Acemoglu and Robinson and Boix, the potential champions of revolution are the poor, in Argentina (as in Chile and Uruguay in the 1970s), the revolutionaries were mostly well-educated middle-class young people.¹²¹ In Argentina, most of the top labor leadership repudiated the leftist guerrillas. And by 1975, the poor overwhelmingly repudiated the guerrillas.

International Actors and Influences

International actors were not directly terribly important in the demise of democracy in Argentina in 1976, but international influences cast a dark shadow over this ill-fated regime. In the southern half of South America, the period from 1964 to 1976 represented the height of the Cold War, and democracy was one of its victims. Under Presidents Richard Nixon (1969-74) and Gerald Ford (1974-77), the United States was largely indifferent toward the fate of democracy in Latin America. In the notorious case of the Chilean coup of September 11, 1973, the US actively supported democracy’s demise. The Argentine military and other pro-coup actors were aware that they would not face sanctions if they struck against democracy. This awareness certainly affected their willingness to undertake a coup.

Throughout the southern half of South America, the left radicalized in the 1960s and early 1970s, drawing inspiration from the Cuban revolution and radical movements elsewhere, including Vietnam. In response to the leftist threat, military dictatorships sprouted even in the two southern cone countries with long histories of democracy, Chile and Uruguay. Right-wing forces galvanized against guerrillas and revolutionary and radical movements, parties, and intellectuals.¹²² After the Chilean coup in September 1973, Argentina was surrounded by dictatorships on all sides--Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Paraguay, and Bolivia. At the time, democracy

¹²⁰Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*; Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution*. Levitsky and Mainwaring make this point broadly for Latin America. “Organized Labor and Democracy in Latin America.”

¹²¹ Moyano, *Argentina’s Lost Patrol*.

¹²² Weyland, *Revolution and Reaction*.

had limited publicly expressible normative appeal in Brazil and the southern cone. The extraordinary economic growth in Brazil from 1968 to 1974 helped create legitimacy for military dictatorships. In Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, militaries and conservative actors believed that dictatorship was an essential bulwark against revolutionary and radical forces. The climate in the southern half of South America was deeply inhospitable to democracy. The fact that dictatorship was normalized throughout the region undoubtedly affected actors' perceptions in Argentina.

Conclusions

I close with three general conclusions that flow directly from the Argentine case. It is difficult to sustain democracy when powerful extremist actors are committed to its destruction. All too often, including in Argentina from 1973 to 1976, extremism begets extremism.¹²³ If anti-system extremist actors take power, other actors will face huge, potentially catastrophic losses. If they fear cataclysmic losses, almost all actors would prefer an authoritarian regime that is likely to protect their core interests. Democracy can survive extremist actors committed to its destruction if those actors are isolated, but the challenge is much more daunting with powerful extremist actors. It is difficult to name a democracy that survived such powerful violent extremist actors as Argentina had from 1973 to 1976.

These extremist actors were not an ex-ante condition that doomed democracy from the outset. As noted above, Perón first encouraged the revolutionary left and then supported the creation of the right-wing death squads to combat it. Moreover, many actors that defected to the pro-coup camp had been willing to give democracy a chance.

Second, in the context of violent extremist actors and weak normative commitments to democracy, bad government performance makes it more difficult to sustain democracy. All political regimes are susceptible to periods of bad government performance, and countless democracies have survived poor government performance, including Argentina from 1983 to 1990, from 1998 to 2002, and since 2012. However, when poor government performance is combined with powerful violent extremist actors and with weak normative commitments to democracy, the prospects are dim.

Third, democracy is more likely to survive if some powerful actors, especially the government and the largest opposition party or parties, are

¹²³ Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñan, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America*; Weyland, *Revolution and Reaction*.

normatively committed to it. Normative commitments to democracy provide an inoculation. They help enable democracies to weather difficult times. If most actors perceive democracy merely instrumentally, for the substantive outcomes it produces, they are likely to engage in practices that eventually hollow democracy and make it vulnerable to incremental erosion or sudden breakdown. In Argentina, even most non-extremist actors were normatively indifferent to democracy. Democracy was a means to achieve other goals. When they found they could not achieve those goals, they turned against democracy, and democracy broke down with little support.