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# “We Are Peronists, We Are Organic”: Discipline, Authority, and Loyalty in Argentine Populism

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**Abstract:** Since 1945, Argentine politics has been largely defined by Peronism, a populist movement established by General Juan Perón. While the ideology of Peronism has shifted and swerved over its seven-decade history, its central emphasis on loyalty has remained constant. This paper examines the notion of “organicity” (*organicidad*), a Peronist conception of obedience, to elucidate how populist movements valorize discipline and loyalty in order to unify their ranks around sentiment and ritual in the absence of more stable programmatic positions. The original sense of “organicity”, as Perón developed it in his early writings, equated to strict military notions of discipline, obedience, and insubordination. In other words, Perón understood loyalty as an organic conception of discipline that consisted of both unyielding deference for the leader and unwavering commitment to the Peronist Movement. Yet, at particular moments in Argentine political history, Peronist militants either find organicity and loyalty to be intrinsically incompatible, or vocalize definitions of organicity that seem to question the top-down structure of the movement celebrated in Perón’s writings. As a result, among Peronists there is disagreement over what it means to behave organically and loyally. This article draws on extensive ethnographic fieldwork among Peronist militants to argue that populism’s authoritarian preoccupation with fealty attempts to obscure the internal contradictions that result from its lack of clear ideological commitments. However, an emphasis on loyalty cannot produce eternally harmonious uniformity. As Peronists come to view those holding alternate interpretations of their doctrine as heretical and traitorous, their accusations against their comrades reveal the intrinsic fragility of populist unity.

**Keywords:** Peronism; populism; political organization; deliberation; authoritarianism; illiberalism; organicity



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“There are two things in politics that one cannot cease to be—loyal and organic”  
—Sergio Berni, Secretary of Security (2012–2015),  
on the program “Terapia de Noticias”, 13 June 2017

## 1. Introduction and Methods

In early December of 2015, at a weekly political meeting in the local headquarters of the Argentine political association *La C mpora*, self-proclaimed “political militants” (*militantes pol ticos*) loyal to the Kirchnerist movement argued over whether they would gather outside the Congress on December 10, the inauguration day of their arch political nemesis, Mauricio Macri.<sup>1</sup> The intention was not to protest Macri, they claimed, but to “accompany” and show solidarity for their beloved leader, the departing president, Cristina Fern ndez de Kirchner. A handful of *compa eros* pointed out that going to the Plaza, on the day that Macri’s supporters would surely flood Plaza Congreso, was inviting confrontation and even violence. However, those in leadership positions, as well as the most dedicated militants, asserted that it was clear that “the organization” (*la orga*), meaning the national leaders of *La C mpora*, expected its militants to go to the Plaza to support their Strategic Conductor, and, as follows, comply with their normative notion of obedience known as “organicity” (*organicidad*).

This article uses ethnographic data to investigate the theme of organicity among Kirchnerist militants to understand how their conceptions of political organization are hostile towards notions of critique and deliberation that are central to liberal democratic politics (Habermas 1981). I will argue that my militant interlocutors often illiberal conceptions of political organization serve a disciplining function that promotes homogeneous and efficacious action in a context of ideological ambiguity that is arguably characteristic of populist politics more generally. While populism usually functions in the context of democracy, it may appeal to conceptions of political organization that seem to be inherited from more authoritarian political traditions as it must forge a unified movement out of a diverse array of social sectors.

Kirchnerism is a contemporary, center-left iteration of Peronism—an Argentine brand of populism that has arguably dominated national politics since 1945. Even when it has not been in power, Peronism has largely defined Argentine political culture. Originating as a workers' movement with a strong base of supporters among the unionized factory workers in the Province of Buenos Aires, Juan Domingo Perón, Peronism's founder and thrice elected president of Argentina (1946–1955, 1973–1974), created a corporatist movement uniting various sectors of Argentine society. Peronism is an example of what Ernesto Laclau called a "popular-democratic ideology", appealing to broad categories, such as "the workers" or the universal protagonist of populist politics, "the people"—that enigmatic "concept" that lacks "a defined theoretical status", yet is central to populist identities across ideological orientations (Laclau [1977] 2011, p. 165). While popular-democratic ideologies may employ discourse that invokes somewhat specific groups by idealizing "the workers" (*los trabajadores*), or "the humble ones" (*los humildes*), as in Peronism, "popular interpellations" have a decidedly "non-class character" (Laclau [1977] 2011, p. 142). Thus, populism, which, for Laclau is a radically democratic iteration of popular politics, produces polyclass alliances. As follows, Perón preached social justice, but not class struggle in the Marxian sense, considering "socialism" and "the notion of class conflict to be negative phenomena" (McLynn 1983, p. 5).<sup>2</sup> Perón believed that the socialist predilection for reflexive critique, "*autocrítica*", makes socialists inherently bad at political leadership, or what Peronists call "conduction" (*conducción*), as the "negative doctrine" of critique stymies projects of positive transformation (Perón [1951] 2011, pp. 95–96). This socialist obsession with *autocrítica*, according to Perón, also leads to "sectarianism" (Perón [1951] 2011, p. 96), which makes unified action, and therefore, conduction, impossible.<sup>3</sup>

"The people" of Peronism, and populism more generally, is necessarily ambiguous; it applies to heterogeneous social sectors. Perón's success was largely based on his ability to serve as an "articulator of heterogeneous forces over which he established his personal control through a complicated system of alliances" (Laclau [1977] 2011, p. 192). As "the people" of populism can also be "fickle" (Sánchez 2016, p. 28), Peronism's historical endurance has largely resided in its capacity to shapeshift over time. For example, in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Peronism morphed into a neoliberal pro-Washington consensus political force under the leadership of Carlos Menem that strongly contrasted with the anti-imperialism of Perón's rhetoric (even if Perón, in reality, maintained relatively friendly relations with Washington during his presidencies (McLynn 1983, pp. 10–11, 14)). Yet, through its many ideological iterations over its more than seven-decade history, Peronism has been marked by structural continuities, including personalist conceptions of political representation (Fierman 2021, p. 239; Knight 1998, p. 244).

My analysis is based on extensive participant observation and interviews conducted with Kirchnerist militants of various political associations carried out between 2014 and 2016 in different parts of the city of Buenos Aires, with a particular focus on members of *La C mpora*, or *camporistas*.<sup>4</sup> During this time, I spoke to well over one hundred self-proclaimed Kirchnerist militants. In this article, I focus on a few of the key interlocutors with whom I had sustained and constant contact. The geographical focus of this study is significant in that Buenos Aires is historically anti-Peronist. While my Kirchnerist interlocutors in Buenos Aires came from a variety of socio-economic sectors, Kirchnerist militancy in Buenos Aires

has a significant middle-class component. While the middle class has historically had quite an antagonistic view of Peronism (Adamovsky 2006; Grimson 2019), during the 1960s and 1970s, Peronism began to appeal to young, progressive urban social sectors that were not previously aligned with Peronism. The strength of Kirchnerist militancy within the city of Buenos Aires is testament to this legacy of a progressive and largely urban, middle-class Peronism that was not part of the original coalition that supported Perón during his early presidencies (1946–1955). Thus, my decision to focus on Peronism in the city of Buenos Aires brings to the forefront the multiple and differing interpretations of Peronist militancy and its organizational principles over its seventy-five-year history.

Most of my research among Kirchnerist militants in Buenos Aires was spent inside neighborhood headquarters of Kirchnerist political associations (*agrupaciones*). These associations' headquarters, which Peronists traditionally call the "*unidad básica*", or "UB", serve as the nucleus of political militancy. Perón viewed the UB as serving a pedagogical function that would "elevate" the "civic" and "national culture of Nation" (Perón [1951] 2011, pp. 68–69).<sup>5</sup> During my research within these nuclei of Peronist social life, conversations around organicity were very common; militants often gossiped and participated in informal conversations about the alleged inorganicity of militants from other political associations. Organicity was often the focus of weekly "political formation" (*formación política*) meetings, which are meant to inculcate militants with knowledge of Peronism, Argentine politics, and an understanding of political organization. During these gatherings and in interviews with me, my Kirchnerist militant interlocutors from *La Cámpora*, as well as militants from other associations, often emphasized that organicity was considered an essential organizing principle of Peronist politics.

While, as we shall see, organicity is not synonymous with loyalty—arguably the most sacrosanct value in the Peronist cosmology—organicity and loyalty are deeply intertwined. In addition to drawing on interviews and observations of militants affiliated with various Kirchnerist associations, my analysis of the UB culture in this specific article focuses on one UB of *La Cámpora* in which I spent between 6 and 20 h a week between June 2015 and March 2016 in a middle to upper-middle-class Buenos Aires neighborhood. My research with other UBs was quite socio-economically diverse in terms of geographical location, but it is significant that this UB was located in a neighborhood that is traditionally very anti-Peronist because of its class makeup. However, those affiliated with this UB ran the gamut in terms of socio-economic class, including individuals who lived in pension houses and middle-class professionals with university degrees who had come from relatively economically comfortable backgrounds. While this UB's geographical location renders it subject to social dynamics that might be different in a slum or the traditionally Peronist Province of Buenos Aires, the location of this particular UB laid bare tensions between militants of different socio-economic classes that are important to my discussion of organicity, revealing that even within a single UB, the rank and file of Peronist militancy is diverse and also subject to tensions that emerge from that very diversity.

In addition to attending weekly political formation meetings, my time with these specific *camporistas* consisted of participating in community service work, known as "territorial work" (*trabajo territorial*), which included afterschool tutoring of neighborhood kids, many of whom lived in nearby pension houses; and attending political rallies.<sup>6</sup> This article does not claim to represent views shared by Argentines generally, but the selected data reflect broad sentiments across the rank and file of Kirchnerist militancy, particularly in the city of Buenos Aires, during the last years of and months following Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's presidency.

While organicity has been a significant aspect of Peronist militancy since early in Peronism's history, the intensity with which my interlocutors spoke of the preeminent importance of organicity in the year preceding and months following the 2015 elections seemed to be the consequence of a changing of the guard that left Kirchnerists with an uncertain future. My militant interlocutors' beloved leader, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, could not seek a third term as the Argentine constitution prohibits a president from serving

more than two consecutive terms in office. The party's candidate, Daniel Scioli, whom Cristina demanded run uncontested in the primary, was widely disliked by many of her loyal supporters (Grimson 2019, chp. 8). For militants, the "won decade" (*dekada ganada*, "dekada" spelled with a "k" for Kirchner) was coming to a close whether their party won or lost, as many militants doubted that Scioli was a true Kirchnerist.

In this article, I begin my analysis of Peronist political organization by examining the concept of organicity in Perón's own statements on the theme of political organization and leadership, focusing on remarks given in a series of lectures delivered at the Escuela Superior Peronista in 1951. The audience for these lectures consisted of individuals affiliated with the Peronist Party (or Justicialist Party, *Partido Justicialista*), many of whom led or would go on to lead UBs. These lectures are compiled as a seminal Peronist text known as *Conducción Política*, which many of my interlocutors cited and referenced throughout my research. I then examine how militants grappled with the principle of organicity—both how they envisage it conceptually and how they enact it practically. The existence of differing conceptions of political organization is not surprising as Perón was quite vague as to the details and procedures of Peronist organization (Levitsky 2003). As a result, even though personalism has been a prevailing aspect of Peronism, in the context of my fieldwork, militants were divided over whether "being organic" meant obeisance towards the leader of the movement—its conductor (or in this case, *conductora*, Cristina)—or obedience to the movement as an entity that transcends any single figure.

The world of Kirchnerist militancy holds relevance beyond the context of Argentina. Peronism reflects populism's general tendency to eschew traditional paradigms of partisan politics, instead, displaying a lack of ideological precision that advantageously lends itself to different interpretations and thereby produces a diverse coalition of supporters.<sup>7</sup> As I have explored elsewhere, Peronism's ideological promiscuity has arguably led it to adapt to shifting political landscapes; however, it has also rendered Peronism vulnerable to internal schisms and factionalism (Fierman 2021). In other words, while Peronism's ideological ambiguity has allowed it to survive over decades, it has created an alliance that is inherently precarious—a dynamic that I believe is applicable to the world of populist politics beyond Argentina.

While the focus of this study is limited to the social world of Kirchnerism, I hope my work will contribute to examinations of populist conceptions of political organization and representation, which may index potentially dissatisfying aspects of liberal governance that could lend insight into the "populist temptation" that has come to define politics across diverse ideological and geographical contexts (Žižek 2006). Considering Peronism to be a token of a populist type, the elements of its organization may be revelatory of how populist movements more generally are not held together by a concrete, common ideological thread, but united by allegiance to a vertical political organization that clashes with liberal ideals of transparency and deliberation (Habermas 1981, 1996).

## 2. Political Conduction

"Being organic" is central to the militant ethic. In political formation meetings and in my interviews with militants, my interlocutors emphasized the preeminent importance of organicity to political militancy. Without organicity, they claimed, it would be impossible to implement Peronism's promise of "social justice" (*justicia social*). The survival of the National and Popular Project of Peronism and now Kirchnerism, many of my interlocutors claimed, relied on the compliance of its defenders', its "soldiers'" (*soldados*), adhering to a larger organizational structure.

My militant interlocutors' use of the word "organic" or "organicity" resembles Raymond Williams' definition of "organic" as relating to "organization" or "organism", expressing the incorporation of independent parts into a larger whole (Williams 1976, pp. 227–29 qtd in Fierman 2021). Williams' definition resonates with the bodily and machinic analogies that my militant interlocutors made when describing organicity. They compared the Kirchnerist Movement, of which the Kirchnerist party, the Front for Victory party, is simply



one part (its “electoral tool”) to a body. This body consists of multiple organs (the labor unions and political associations of the Kirchnerist movement) working together. Each organ is specialized and unique, yet connected to every other through its loyalty to the movement. Thus, the image of the body suggests both cooperation and differentiation.

A militant’s relationship to the movement and its leader is mediated by their participation in a specific union or political association, each of which has its own leaders on a national, regional, and local level. The leader of the movement, the conductor, presides over the vertically structured movement, while these leaders of associations, unions, and their local branches, serve as intermediaries between the conductor and the “conducted mass” (Perón [1951] 2011, p. 84). The conductor does not manage details, but directs strategy from a broad vantage point. Those who lead associations and their local branches oversee the details on a local level, in a manner that represents the strategy of the conductor (Perón [1951] 2011, p. 159). Tactics, the detail-oriented aspects of conduction are of no concern to the conductor, they are the concern of “auxiliary conductors” and those loyal to them who are familiar with local contexts and facts on the ground. According to most of the militants with whom I discussed organicity, the stratified architecture of the movement promotes unified and efficient action; it allows for rapid and precise implementation of the conductor’s strategy.

Yet, given that Peronism has always been characterized by an ability to adapt to different circumstances, the tenets of political organization outlined in *Conducción Política* represent a shift in Perón’s rhetoric. Oscar Aelo has argued that an emphasis on verticalism clearly emerges in 1951, the year Perón gave the lectures of *Conducción Política*, as the Great Conductor became increasingly concerned with the uniformization of Peronism and its party (Aelo 2004, pp. 103–4). The frictions between the allied forces that had led to Perón’s victory had never really been calmed in the wake of his 1946 electoral victory (Aelo 2004, p. 89), and in 1951, Perón was concerned about how these internal divisions could play out as the party had to decide on its list of candidates. Thus, even as early as Perón’s first presidency, discourses around the organizing principles of Peronist organization demonstrate a considerable degree of malleability.

Moreover, for all of the emphasis on organicity among my militant interlocutors, the main “electoral tool” of Peronism, the *Partido Justicialista*, or PJ, has lacked centralization and “routinized internal rules and procedures”, endowing the party, and by extension Peronism more generally, with a “substantial degree of strategic flexibility” (Levitsky 2003, p. 3). Perón created Peronism “from above”, through a highly personalistic style of governance, while “the party never developed a disciplined, hierarchical organization” (Levitsky 2003, p. 24).

Perón celebrated personalism yet warned against permanently relying upon it as a unifying force. “The Perón Movement”, its patriarch declared, must initially be united under the leadership of one man, although this individual will “afterwards be replaced by organization” (Perón [1948] 1973, pp. 55–56). While Perón’s writings are oft quoted by his acolytes, Peronism’s detractors view them as expressing Peronism’s latent authoritarian conceptions of political power (Finchelstein 2010, 2014, 2017; Germani 1978).<sup>8</sup> This personalist conception of political representation resonates with Claude Lefort’s description of totalitarianism as “power concentrated within the limits of the ruling apparatus and, ultimately, in an individual who embodies the unity and will of the people” (Lefort 1986, p. 287). It is exactly this dependance on an organizational structure that equates a homogeneous notion of the people with a single individual that members of the non-Peronist left told me was indicative of what they viewed as Peronism’s inherent authoritarianism. To some of its harshest critics, Peronism emerged, at least in part, from a “fascist unconscious” (Finchelstein 2010, p. 170) of which its organizational traditions are proof. Signs of Mussolini’s influence on Perón are evident in “the importance of union organization” in what the latter considered “the arts of conduction” (Adamovsky 2006, p. 261). Perón even tried (unsuccessfully) to integrate professionals and intellectuals into a centralized trade

union, which would have bureaucratically integrated them into the organic structure of the movement (Adamovsky 2006).

Many of my militant interlocutors find comparisons between Peronism and fascism as highly offensive, oftentimes claiming that such a poorly informed impression of Peronism was shaped by the latent prejudices of liberalism. Some militants expressed that verticalism is not as authoritarian or anti-democratic as one might think. In her account of trade unions affiliated with Kirchnerism, Sian Lazar writes that her research interlocutors “conceive” of verticalism as producing relationships of “mirroring, of mutual participation in an organic whole, rather than one where the base members simply delegate their power or right to participate to their representative” (Lazar 2017, p. 120). Perón himself clearly stated that he did not want Peronists to follow their leaders like mute herds of sheep (Perón [1951] 2011, p. 83). He claimed reflexive critique, “*autocrítica*”, was necessary, even if painful; however, critical opinions should not be discussed outside of “friends” (Perón [1951] 2011, pp. 143–44). During my research, this question of the place of critique and how it relates to organicity was quite contentious for Kirchnerists, many of whom, before and in the wake of the 2015 elections, felt that perhaps their *conductora*’s conduction deserved to be called into question. Moreover, due to the lack of codification, or any form of explanation on political organization, how to conduct *autocrítica* depends on one’s interpretation of the arguably vague tenets of political organization articulated by Perón.

For my *camporista* interlocutors, who belonged to arguably the most influential political association in Kirchnerism, their interpretation of political organization was shaped by an adherence to personalist fealty—unquestioning obedience to the orders that came from above. This conception of organicity blatantly and unapologetically diverges from liberal democratic notions of deliberation, which many Peronists justify as precluding the efficacious unified action necessary for a project of social transformation.

The authoritarianism in Peronist personalism serves an organizational purpose—one that is perhaps necessary for a political movement that since its inception has eschewed any concrete ideological program (Finchelstein 2017, p. 110), celebrating a doctrine characterized by “extreme flexibility” (McLynn 1983, p. 1). As I have written elsewhere, Peronism’s lack of clear, programmatic ideological orientation allowed for the formation of a polyclass alliance united by the figure of Perón against a perceived common enemy (Fierman 2021). A prevailing aspect of Peronist and populist political organization is a corporatist personalism that views the leader as absorbing all the potential internal contradictions created by the heterogeneous populist coalition, which brings together disparate and different social groups and popular demands.

As a result, historically Peronists have held differing and even conflicting interpretations of what the Peronist program ought to be (James 1976, 1978, 1988; Levitsky 2003).<sup>9</sup> Some militants I spoke to, most notably the *camporistas*, seemed to hold what Laclau and Mouffe would characterize as a relatively “authoritarian” conception of hegemony, a very verticalist and personalist conception of political organization and representation (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985). During one of our many interviews, Leandro, a *camporista* who was often disgruntled with this highly verticalist conception of organicity, complained that such a top-down structure smacked of elitist “*vanguardismo*.”<sup>10</sup> All of those in leadership positions in Leandro’s UB, except for him, were clearly middle class. Many of them were from other neighborhoods, had graduated from university, and often held graduate degrees. Leandro had not completed secondary school. He claimed he resembled the children I tutored alongside other *camporistas* as part of territorial work. He was the only person with any authority in the UB from what he called “the popular sectors of society;” he, therefore, could relate to the children who lived in the neighborhood pension houses in a way that his *compañeros* could not. For Leandro, many of his *camporista* *compañeros* viewed themselves as educating the masses, but they could not identify with many of “the people” (*el pueblo*) they claimed to serve. He stated that organicity sometimes seemed to him to be akin to blind obedience which did not take facts on the ground into account. He had often been told that some of his ideas, which were aimed at engaging neighborhood children and

their families, were not aligned with the desires of “*la orga*”—those with official roles in *La C mpora*, many of whom had undergraduate and even graduate degrees and worked state jobs in either the Secretariat of Commerce or the state-owned airline, Aerol neas Argentinas. From Leandro’s point of view, orders came from above and were dictated by underlings who were unfamiliar with the territory and people they were meant to “form” and “educate” as Peronist militants. While he respected his very organic *compa eros*, he believed their attitude towards militancy on a local level fundamentally misunderstood the lived experience of “the people” they constantly invoked in their rhetoric.

Peronism’s “ideological eclecticism” (Levitsky 2003, p. 27), combined with its corporatist emphasis on personalism, has produced the conditions for authoritarian conceptions of political organization, or at least illiberal notions of political representation. Additionally, because the principles of Peronist political organization are contested among Peronists, various and conflicting interpretations or organicity exist at one time, creating a situation in which different sectors of the movement perceive each other’s actions to be inorganic, insubordinate, and even disloyal. Even within a single UB, militants may disagree as to how properly serve the movement and “the people”.

### 3. “Only the Organization Can Defeat Time”

Peronism’s “ideological eclecticism” has produced factiousness as different elements of Peronism, holding contrasting and conflicting conceptions of Peronism’s ideological orientation, have clashed over what it means to be a loyal Peronist. As a result, in the past, some Peronist militants have disagreed with the party structure and the leaders of the movement, perceiving them as betraying the true orientation of Peronism.

A militant from the Kirchnerist political association *La Kolina*, Soledad, explained to me that while she always deeply identified as a Peronist, during the 1990s and the neoliberal policies of Peronist president Carlos Menem, she was not necessarily “*org nica*”. She always considered herself to be loyal, but she did not respect the authority of the *Partido Justicialista*. I asked her to expand on this difference between loyalty and organicity:

Organicity has to do with complying (*acatar*) with the organization (*la org nica*). Loyalty is one of the most important Peronist values (*valores*). Keep in mind that it wasn’t easy to be loyal to Per n during the proscription [of Peronism].<sup>11</sup> Some Peronist union leaders (*dirigentes sindicales*) sold themselves to the dictatorship to maintain privileges. The loyal ones were those who stayed firm, despite persecution or jail. In the 1990s, the structure of the Justicialist Party became neoliberal. Many of us ceased to be organic to the party. The organic representation of Peronism was disgusting (*azquerosa*). However, we continued to be loyal to the principles and historic flags (*banderas hist ricas*) of Peronism.

Soledad went on to explain that Peronism was a “doctrinaire” (*doctrinario*) movement, so her commitment to the Three Flags of Peronism and the Twenty Truths of Justicialism rendered her a loyal Peronist.<sup>12</sup> Her loyalty to Peronist doctrine, she suggested, had led her to act inorganically when the leadership of the party conflicted with true Peronist values—her inorganicity was actually an expression of loyalty to the authentic Peronism that Menem and his cronies had betrayed. Soledad claimed her views were informed by the words of Per n himself, and that I need only reference *Conducci n Pol tica* to see that she was a loyal Peronist.

Soledad’s differentiation between organicity and loyalty illuminates how individuals who are passionate about their Peronist identity can understand what it means to be a loyal Peronist in quite different terms. Just as my *camporista* interlocutors looked upon political associations who declared they would not go to Plaza Congreso as behaving inorganically, those who would not bid farewell to the Strategic Conductor, viewed their *camporista* critics as having mistaken personalist allegiance to Cristina for loyalty to the movement. Some even claimed that an attachment to personalism had led *camporistas* to undermine the party (the Front for Victory), and therefore act inorganically, resulting in a lack of unified effort to

get Scioli elected, and leading to the victory of what was sure to be a neoliberal, rightwing administration.

For example, some militants from other associations told me that they believed *camporistas* did not do enough campaign work for Scioli and had instead concerned themselves with supporting *camporista* candidates in congressional and local elections. Critiques of *La C mpora* claimed that the association cared more about electing a few hardcore Cristina supporters, or “*Cristinistas*”, than ensuring the perpetuity of the National and Popular Project by fighting to keep Peronist occupancy of the executive branch. When one of my key interlocutors, Lisandro, asked his *camporista compa eros* why the interior of their UB was filled with images of the Kirchners, the Per ns, and the association’s leaders, but did not have single poster of Scioli, he was told that those “from above” had never sent them such materials. It would be inorganic for a UB to openly campaign for Scioli without being explicitly told to and sent the proper materials by “*la orga*”. Consequently, some militants confessed to me in hushed tones that they were anxious Cristina was not invested in the outcome of the national elections, of which the lack of enthusiasm for Scioli among the more personalist, or *Cristinista*, sectors of Kirchnerism was certainly proof.

These internal differences became obvious during Cristina’s second term, which she won resoundingly in the 2011 elections. After her reelection, “*Cristinismo*” increasingly established itself as the dominant force within Kirchnerism and its Front for Victory party, and some figures who had previously positioned themselves as critical allies, reinvented themselves as ardent *Cristinistas*. Tensions between those espousing and those critical of *Cristinismo* can be reflective of class and even generational difference. Many of my militant interlocutors who were critical of *Cristinismo* considered it to be an ideological proclivity of “White and blond” (*blanco y rubio*) Kirchnerists, in contrast to the “Black Peronists” (*negros peronistas*) of the working and proletarian classes. The media and Argentines generally depict political associations with *Cristinista* orientations as attracting younger militants. While these stereotypes do somewhat correlate to reality, my research among militants from various political associations revealed all of them to be quite socio-economically and generationally diverse. Yet, these generalizations are significant in that they reflect enduring internal divisions within Peronism that have existed since the 1960s, when a new generation of middle-class youths flocked to Peronism espousing deeply personalist conceptions of loyalty, quick to accuse many established Peronist leaders of insubordination and treachery. Thus, accusations of inorganicity are imbued with moral value judgments that bring old and enduring injuries to the surface.

In the lead up to the national elections, accusations of inorganicity were lodged between *Cristinista* and non-*Cristinista* sectors of Kirchnerism with increasing regularity. Militants often claimed that those who could perceive their actions as inorganic, simply misunderstood the meaning of “organicity”. Nearly all of the militants I met believed that organicity was of preeminent importance, claiming that they assiduously carried out their militancy organically. These accusations elucidated that their interpretations of Peronist praxis were incommensurable with each other. Furthermore, these accusations of inorganicity insinuated, or even stated, that those failing to act organically were acting in a disloyal manner, foreshadowing the naming of fellow *compa eros* as “traitors” (*traidores*).

With the phenomenon of *Cristinismo*, we see how the personalism promulgated by Per n persists in contemporary Peronism. We also see how the programmatic and organizational ambiguity of Peronist doctrine creates a situation in which personalism can be called into question. Peronism’s history of mercurial ideological attachments, or “programmatic flexibility” (Levitsky 2003, p. 30), accompanied by “weakly routinized organizational structures” (Levitsky 2003, p. 31), has created the structural conditions in which Peronist militants of different political organizations—associations and labor unions—can hold differing interpretations of Peronism’s core mission as well as its dictates for political organization. However, historically there is not much tolerance for conflicting readings of Peronism among Peronists, reflecting an anti-pluralism that Finchelstein has



argued is part and parcel of populist regimes across the ideological spectrum (Finchelstein 2017, p. 104).

Yet, Peronism, like other populist movements, depends on coalitional unity among different social sectors. Thus, while populist movements depend upon the “equivalential chain” of different social sectors, each with its respective demands, all coalescing around a common leader against a common enemy (Laclau 2005), populism’s intrinsic aversion to pluralism threatens to undo the diverse coalition upon which populist political success largely depends. In the case of Peronism and its highly personalist tradition, the figure of the leader is intended to mediate differences between these diverse sectors. Finchelstein argues that this personalist corporatism has been inherited from fascism (Finchelstein 2017, p. 85). Peronism is perpetually characterized by personalism and sectarianism, all of which are related to an anti-pluralist aversion towards critique, or *autocrítica*, that starkly contrasts with liberal commendations of deliberation.

#### 4. Accompanying the Strategic Conductor

For those *camporistas* debating whether or not to “accompany” their beloved leader, being organic meant adhering to the dictates of their “*dirigencia*”, a general term that referred to the leaders of their association, whom they viewed as having a direct relationship with Cristina. The national leaders of the association communicated an agenda to lower-ranking regional and local leaders, who, in turn communicated these commands to the *responsables* and *referentes* who oversaw the daily operations of a UB in a specific neighborhood. Militants often referred to the implementation of this downward chain of command as “lowering the line” (*bajar línea*). Thus, I understood that many, if not all, of these *camporistas* believed that Cristina must have desired and requested that the leaders of respective political associations round up their militants and gather in Plaza Congreso on December 10, or at least that her beloved son, Máximo, one of the national leaders (*dirigentes*) and founder of *La Cámpora*, had thought it appropriate. For *camporistas*, lowering the line was viewed as a carrying out Cristina’s wishes.

Members of the association often told me that they believed *La Cámpora* to be the most Cristinista association, and therefore, the most faithful to the movement and its National and Popular Project, which, in their opinion, was inseparable from Cristina. *La Cámpora*’s origins can be traced to early on in Kirchnerism, which took power in 2003 with Néstor Kirchner’s (Cristina’s husband and predecessor) assumption to the presidency (2003–2007). Néstor was deeply invested in creating a youthful wing of militants associated with the Kirchnerist movement. This youthful militancy became a more visible national force in the wake of Cristina’s first political crisis, provoked by an attempt to raise tariffs on the agricultural sector in 2008. However, the association truly became the most influential wing of Kirchnerist militancy in the aftermath of Néstor’s death in 2010. *Camporistas* often told me that they felt like Cristina’s “guardians” or “soldiers”, who sought to defend Cristina from her enemies in the absence of her lifelong partner and protector. While the leadership on a national and local level of *La Cámpora* is quite young (its national leaders are now in their late and mid-40s), militants who attend meetings in UBs are generationally diverse. Yet, for my *camporista* interlocutors of all ages, *La Cámpora* was appealing precisely because they believed the it was “the association of Cristina”. Almost all of my *camporista* interlocutors believed that criticizing Cristina for a decision or policy only served her enemies, undermining the National and Popular Project and “the people” whose interests it served.

The leader, or *responsable*, who managed this specific UB, Miguel, presented the decision to “accompany” Cristina in her last hours as president as a clear-cut matter of organicity—a principle that these militants had long told me was sacrosanct and inviolable. Thus, to position the question of accompanying Cristina as a matter of organicity made clear that the *compañeros* were expected to go to Plaza Congreso the day of the inauguration regardless of their personal opinion as to whether it seemed like a wise idea or not.

The *responsable's* *compañeros* repeated his claim that personal opinions were insignificant in the face of one's duty to act organically, parroting his statements that personal discontent with the decisions of the directorship must be subjugated by adherence to an organic structure. Even the inordinately high number of *compañeros* expressing their frustration with the association's *dirigencia* almost always concluded their remarks by briefly sermonizing on the preeminent importance of organicity and their determination to act in an organic fashion.

However, they did not want their irritation with *La C mpora's* leadership to go unheard, hoping that their "concerns" (*preocupaciones*) would be communicated upwards. They understandably worried about the prospect of violence from the police or Macri's supporters. They implicitly suggested that loyalty to the leader—as carried out through the organic chain of command—demanded that they act against their better judgment, putting their own safety at risk for an unjustified and unwise motive. Yet, a dedication to organicity and to Cristina had to prevail. For these *camporistas*, loyalty to the Movement cannot exist without loyalty to an organic structure—unquestioning and wavering loyalty to the words and desires of the Strategic Conductor as interpreted by the directorship of their association—which under the auspices of her son, is perceived, by some, as an unadulterated distillation of her will.

Marta, a *compa era* of approximately 70 years of age, most explicitly questioned the notion of organicity being put forth by the *responsable* and the militants that formed part of *La C mpora's* hierarchy: "How does this even work? If there is obviously such dissatisfaction with this decision [to attend], why are we being asked to do this? We are organic, but do our opinions not go upward? Does the *dirigencia* not listen to us?" Her voice was tinged with desperation, and while no one else had dared expressed dissent so directly, many nodded their head in assent as she spoke. At the same time, a few others started to shift in their seats uncomfortably.

"*Compa era*, I understand your concerns. I am not saying I don't share them. But we are militants. We function organically. We cannot make decisions for ourselves that go against the desires of the directorship of the organization", responded Juana, who was seated under the painted Jauretche quote, "Only the organization can defeat time" (*Solamente la organizaci n derrota al tiempo*). Marta was challenging the logic of this quote and the association's Cristinista interpretation of organicity quite openly, and the directness of her critique was quite startling. A strong emphasis on organicity within the UB had usually precluded open debate over the legitimacy of authority. In the many months that I had been doing research with these militants, I had never before witnessed such overt discontent with the association's hierarchical structure, and the openness with which individuals like Marta were expressing their dissatisfaction was clearly troubling to militants like Juana, notorious for her respect for the stark verticalism and personalism of *La C mpora*.

The issue of whether or not to go to Plaza Congreso on the day of Macri's inauguration became a moot point, as disagreements between the ingoing and outgoing administration created an exceptional situation in which Cristina would step down on the midnight before the inauguration, and a provisional president would hold office until the swearing-in ceremony the following afternoon. However, the discussion in this UB of *La C mpora* was a particularly intense incident during my fieldwork as it was one of the only moments in which anyone voiced dissatisfaction with the strict top-down structure of the organization—a structure that seemed to intentionally curtail critique, or at least allow for critique as long as those engaging in it confirmed that their doubts about the directorship's decision were superseded by their commitment to organicity.

Yet, before it was decided that Cristina would not attend Macri's inauguration, some other political associations allied with Kirchnerism quite publicly declared they had no intention of going to Plaza Congreso on December 10. Not only did the situation hold the potential for confrontation and even violence, but some even told me that they felt that the very notion of "accompanying" Cristina was a demonstration of personalist loyalty that showed very little capacity for "*autocr tica*" at a moment when many Kirchnerist militants

believed Cristina had strategically erred in the elections, resulting in FpV's defeat. They did not want to participate in a declaration of personalist allegiance to a leader whom they loved, but whose future as *conductora* seemed uncertain and whose conduction merited at least some degree of critique. Some militants from political associations who had stated they would not "accompany" their *conductora* avoided blaming Cristina for the electoral loss. They claimed that Cristinista factions (and almost always named or alluded to *La C mpora* as an example of such a faction) had led the Front for Victory party to electoral failure. As follows, to go to Plaza Congreso on December 10 would send the wrong message to the movement, which badly needed to undergo a phase of reflection and critique.

Those who had planned on "accompanying" Cristina, as well as those who had publicly stated they would not, both believed themselves to be loyal militants. Some of those militants critical of *Cristinismo* still claimed that they even complied with organicity—they were loyal to their particular association and its leadership, which was dedicated to preserving the National and Popular Project. Some non-Cristinista militants described themselves as "less organic" than *Cristinista* political associations, implicitly associating organicity with personalism, but never wholly critical of organicity. Peronism's organizational and ideological flexibility have made all of these readings potentially legitimate, reflecting Per n's often ambiguous and mercurial example.

The *camporistas'* tense meeting about bidding Cristina farewell in Plaza Congreso certainly underscored the prevalence of personalist interpretations of organicity among many militants affiliated with the association. Moreover, Juana and Miguel's contention that organicity required subordinating one's personal opinions and desires to those of the conductor presented organicity as unwavering obedience that renders one's personal judgment relatively insignificant. One followed orders even when these orders conflicted with their better judgment.

According to Lisa Wedeen, one is truly obedient when one does not really believe in that which they feel they must do out of submission. Obedience, for Wedeen, is contrary to pure faith or "belief", and is ultimately indicative of the absence of both (Wedeen 1999, p. 73). Following this logic, the asceticism of the militant ethic requires that one sometimes sacrifice conviction in order to be submissively dutiful. For Lefort, totalitarian notions of organization and political representation understand "the Peoples-as-One" as exclusively "represented and affirmed only by a great Other" (Lefort 1986, p. 287). For many of my most personalist, or Cristinista, Kirchnerist militant interlocutors, the united "people" of populism can only be realized through their identification with a fetishized leader. During this meeting of *camporistas*, some even seemed to suggest that the loyalty to the movement and leader, which were indistinguishable from each other, demanded that individual desires and thoughts be ignored in favor of conformity with the leader's will.

Yet, as I once observed a long-time Peronist militant, Pedro, explain to his fellow *compa eros*, the conductor of the movement has access to knowledge that ordinary militants do not. Thus, it was never a militant's place to question the *conductora's* strategy, but to implement it tactically and locally. One was organic precisely because they had faith in the conductor's superior knowledge and strategic acumen. Still, whether one subordinates one's desires to those of the *conductora* out of true belief in her superiority or not, this submissive yielding of personal judgment to obedience resonates with Lefort's description of totalitarian conceptions of political representation. My interlocutors' conceptions of organicity clearly unsettle liberalism's endorsement of measured deliberation.

## 5. Conclusions

While Kirchnerism is undeniably a democratic political force, its personalist proclivities, which it inherits from previous iterations of Peronism, resemble aspects of authoritarian and totalitarian conceptions of political representation and organization. Partha Chatterjee has criticized even left-leaning populist movements, of which Kirchnerism (if not Peronism) is often considered an example, for relying on authoritarian or corrupt means that undermine the progressive agendas they claim to represent (Chatterjee 2019,

p. 120). Populist movements, Chatterjee asserts, “depend on a charismatic leader at the top of a centralized organization and inevitably veer in the direction of using arbitrary and authoritarian power, ostensibly to deliver justice to the people” (Chatterjee 2019, p. 134). In other words, populism often presents personalist loyalty as essential to delivering on promises of political transformation; yet the very authoritarianism of this personalism forecloses the possibility of the radical socio-political transformation that is supposedly promised in the first place. The figure of the leader as an exceptional figure challenges liberal paradigms of political representation, but Chatterjee, certainly not a stalwart defender of liberalism, warns that any leftist projects ought to be wary of this personalist conception of political representation. In other words, one does not need to be a liberal to take issue with authoritarian, personalist conceptions of political representation and organization.

While some celebrate populism as radically democratic (perhaps, most notably Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018), others have argued that populism is particularly “dangerous” precisely “because it is democracy in action” (Samet 2019, p. 164). Populism certainly should not be considered wholly anti-democratic because it often emerges in the context of democracy. My focus on organicity elucidates how Kirchnerism, which is undeniably a movement that functions within a democratic context, contains elements with highly verticalist conceptions of political organization that strike many as authoritarian. To reference this dimension of Peronism is not intended to disqualify or belittle it as a doctrine or movement, but rather to understand how an enduring political force in a democratic context has succeeded precisely because of its illiberal dimensions, which have allowed it to ideologically and organizationally reinvent itself over its lifetime.

My goal is not to celebrate or critique liberal democracy or illiberal forms of political representation, but rather to show how Peronist militancy is defined by principles of political organization that are not conducive to liberal notions of deliberative discourse. Peronist conceptions of conduction and organicity, outlined by Perón and by most of the Peronists with whom I conducted fieldwork, delineate a cosmology in which uniformity of thought and action requires a strict top-down structure. Perón is careful to say that he wants those who are conducted to be convinced of what they must do. But he also states that not everyone is to be equally informed of the course or motives for every action: they are to be convinced and informed only as much as is “appropriate” (*oportunamente*) (Perón [1951] 2011, p. 163). Pedro, the seasoned Peronist militant, echoes Perón’s assertion that not all parts of the movement should be equally informed of strategy when he asserts that militants, in contrast to their leaders, do not have access to the full picture. The Peronist political organization does not arrive at decisions based on deliberative engagement from all of its diverse parts, or “organs”. The organs carry out an agenda that is laid out for them by their leader.

The ambiguous dimensions of Peronism have arguably allowed it to adapt to shifting political and cultural contexts over its more than seven-decade history; yet, at the same time, it has cyclically produced conditions under which alliance among diverse factions, supposedly united by their loyalty to the movement, devolves into sectarianism (see Fierman 2021; Laclau 2005, pp. 216–21).<sup>13</sup> This vertiginous dynamic between coalitional unity and factionalism is arguably due to authoritarian and intentionally vague notions of political organization that endorse personalism, but invite multiple interpretations. It seems, at least in the Argentine case, the “ideological promiscuity” (Riofrancos 2018 qtd in Fierman 2021) of populism is reflected in differing conceptions of political organization. Peronism’s ideological flexibility has allowed it to adapt to shifts in Argentina’s political landscape. It has also created a context in which factiousness is inevitable. Deeply hierarchical conceptions of political organization serve an ordering function in a context of ideological ambiguity—although, in such a context of ideological ambiguity, verticalist conceptions of political organization may not be shared by all.

I hope that my work will contribute to understanding how populist politics engages fantasies of radical democratization and transparency, as well as illiberal conceptions of organization and representation. Hopefully, through more investigations into populist cos-



mologies, we can come to a more nuanced comprehension of populism and its resurgence as not necessarily antithetical to democracy, but as a disaffection with liberal democracy that both embodies radically democratic desires and illiberal, and even authoritarian conceptions of organization. Understanding populism as neither antithetical to nor wholly compatible with democracy challenges liberalism's myopic conception of the left-to-right ideological spectrum, while also lending insight into how democracies can improve and thereby, perhaps, preclude the possibility of popular disenchantment.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** My research was carried out according to the ethical principles considered standard in human subject research in the United States. All of my research interlocutors gave verbal informed consent, which is allowed in cases where human subjects do not want to sign documents, which is common in certain fieldwork contexts, such as Latin America, where there is historical reason for subjects to be nervous about a paper trail connected to a researcher in the United States who is interested in leftist Latin American politics.

**Data Availability Statement:** There is no publicly available database related to this research. My research methods consisted of participant observation and interviews which were recorded on the author's iPhone or written down. Data from this research, carried out during her doctoral work, appears in her doctoral dissertation, as well as other related publications.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As in my other published work on Peronist militancy (Fierman 2020, 2021), I translate the Spanish word "*militante*" as "militant" rather than activist to properly convey the passionate commitment of the interlocutors interviewed and described in this article. For other examples of work on contemporary Peronist militancy see the work of Javier Auyero (2001); Sabina Frederic (2004); Daniel James (2000); Julieta Quirós (2016).
- <sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Laclau argues that a populist movement may "present a class as a historical agent of the people's interests" (Laclau [1977] 2011, p. 165), but "the people" does not exclusively represent one single class in a class struggle. Accordingly, Peronism has been able to appeal generally to "the people", "the workers", "the shirtless ones" (*descamisados*), claiming to represent the popular sectors of Argentine society without adopting Marxian conceptions of class struggle.
- <sup>3</sup> In *Conducción Política*, Perón asserts that in Soviet Socialist politics, they "change leaders like shirts", which leads to "organic chaos" (*caos orgánico*) (Perón [1951] 2011, p. 85).
- <sup>4</sup> The conclusions I draw in this article are based on participant observation and interviews carried out for my doctoral dissertation between 2012 and 2016, with a particular focus on 2014–2016. As the focus of the dissertation was on loyalty and accusations of betrayal among Kirchnerist militants belonging to several different political associations affiliated with Kirchnerism, my interviews focused on themes of loyalty, fellowship (*compañerismo*), and betrayal. Interviews also focused on my interlocutors' personal experiences with Kirchnerist and Peronist militancy, as well as their interpretations of the what it means to be a Peronist militant. During these interviews, militants often brought up the topic of organicity, which also emerged as a central theme in the local political meetings of the political associations with which I carried out my extensive participant observation. As follows, in 2015 and 2016, I often explicitly asked my interlocutors their opinions and definitions of organicity, among other dominant themes that emerged during my fieldwork.

- 5 In this quote, Perón is specifically talking about the purpose of the Escuela Superior Peronista, a school that trained Peronist leaders, many of whom led UBs, which are meant to carry out this educating work within a given territory or neighborhood.
- 6 All UBs from every political association with which I carried out research conducted territorial work, which always included afterschool tutoring (*apoyo escolar*). In addition, territorial work often encompassed activities that offered people living in the neighborhood free services and knowledge. For example, this UB, as did many others, provided free legal aid (led by *compañeros* who were lawyers or law students), classes on plumbing intended to help those in the neighborhood who could not afford to hire someone for repairs, classes on self-defense taught by a *compañeros* with boxing experience, and arts and crafts activities intended for neighborhood children. I had the most experience with *apoyo escolar* and as a result, was often asked to participate in that activity on a regular basis.
- 7 As I have previously argued, “populist movements are coalitional by nature, relying on the unity of disparate social forces” (Fierman 2021, p. 237), united by a common understanding of the “antagonistic frontier” that discursively separates “the social scene into two camps”—“the people” against an anti-people (Laclau 2005, p. 87).
- 8 Germani and Finchelstein see a clear genealogy between Mussolini’s fascism and Perón’s populism, particularly in how the latter drew on the influence of the former to attempt to build a deeply personalist and corporatist movement joining labor unions, the Catholic church, and the military. My interlocutors ardently deny that Peronism has any relationship to fascism, though I suggest a possible genealogy without categorizing Peronism as fascism.
- 9 The most dramatic infighting within Peronism occurred during the time Peronism was proscribed (to varying degrees) after Perón was deposed in a coup d’état and during his exile (1955–1973). I have previously argued how memories and memorializations of this period, which Peronists refer to as “the Resistance” (*la Resistencia*), have defined the social world of Kirchnerist militancy. While Peronists often recall the Resistance as a time of deep Peronist solidarity, in reality, during this period, “Peronism fell into a state of “virtual anarchy” (Levitsky 2003, p. 42).
- 10 In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe analyze the concept of hegemony across different strains of socialist thought. Critical of an elitism of the vanguardism in Leninist political organization, which they label an “authoritarian” conception of hegemony, they put forth a Gramscian conception of political organization and representation that is far less hierarchical. This Gramscian approach to hegemony, the authors claim, allows for the formation of a social movement that joins heterogeneous political demands (1985). Laclau expands on this approach in his seminal work on populism published two decades later (2005).
- 11 Many progressive Peronists view the trade union bureaucracy during the Resistance as conservative, regressive, and even treasonous, particularly as certain figures, such as Augusto Vandor, leader of the steelworkers union, envisioned the possibility of a “Peronism without Perón”. At the same time, Daniel James has pointed out that many of those who denounced Vandor as a traitor should not necessarily be considered the guardians of Peronist authenticity (1976). The proscription and Perón’s exile are often referred to by Peronists as “the Resistance”. It is often remembered as an experience of deep solidarity among Peronists. However, the second half of the Resistance was characterized by “virtual anarchy” (Levitsky 2003, p. 42), as different factions of Peronism clashed, sometimes violently.
- 12 The Three Flags of Peronism are social justice (*justicia social*), economic independence (*independencia económica*), and political sovereignty (*soberanía política*). The Twenty Truths of Peronism were announced by Perón on the fifth anniversary of Peronism’s birth, referred to as “Loyalty Day”, on 17 October 1950. The Twenty Truths sound vaguely oriented towards increased socio-economic equality, but, as a whole, they are not indicative of a specific ideological program or concrete policy platform.
- 13 Laclau argues that during the Resistance, Perón’s enunciations (in the form of public remarks or written or recorded messages to the different factions of Peronism in Argentina) “could be given a multiplicity of meanings” to an ideologically diverse audience of Peronists (Laclau 2005, p. 216). As a result, very different groups could be united through their identification with Perón. Yet, once Perón returned to Argentina in 1973, Laclau, argues, these multiple meanings came into conflict with each other, as once in power the trade union bureaucracy and the Peronist left realized they, “had nothing in common . . . [T]he only thing which kept them within the same political camp was the common identification with Perón as leader. This amounted to very little, for Perón embodied for each faction totally incompatible political principles”. The movement devolved into internal sectarianism which only accelerated after Perón’s death in 1974, a consequence of which was the 1976 coup d’état and “the establishment of one of the most brutally repressive regimes of the twentieth century.” (Laclau 2005, pp. 220–21).

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