

“I Embrace You with the Affection and Loyalty of Always”: Personalism and Exchange in Argentine Populism

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R E S U M E N

Este artículo examina una acusación de traición dentro del Movimiento Kirchnerista de Argentina, en los meses previos a las elecciones presidenciales de 2015. La presidenta, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, líder del Frente para el Partido de la Victoria, no podía postularse para la presidencia después de servir dos mandatos consecutivos. Para evitar una elección primaria disputada, le pide un favor a su querido asesor, Florencio Randazzo, quien, a su vez, se niega a llevarlo a cabo. La negativa de Randazzo es considerada como una traición abyecta por muchos kirchneristas. Asimismo, muchos kirchneristas simpatizan con la situación de Randazzo, creyendo que Kirchner había maltratado a su leal funcionario y no lo contrario. La valorización de la lealtad de ambas partes inevitablemente conduce a una obsesiva preocupación por la traición. Apelando a las teorías de reciprocidad e intercambio para investigar la dinámica tensa entre la jerarquía y el igualitarismo en la política kirchnerista, este artículo muestra cómo las diferentes interpretaciones de las acciones de Randazzo y Kirchner exponen la lealtad y la camaradería populistas al ser inherentemente precarias. [Kirchnerismo, populismo, Argentina, lealtad, traición]

A B S T R A C T

In 2015, the President of Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner asked her beloved protégé, Florencio Randazzo, to end his candidacy as the party's presidential nominee, offering him the party's candidacy in a gubernatorial election. Refusing to accept this consolation prize, Randazzo comes to be labeled by Cristina's most die-hard followers as a traitor of the Kirchnerist Movement, exposing deep internal rifts between those

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espousing a more personalist interpretation of loyalty and those wary of equating loyalty to a political movement with loyalty to a single person. These rifts elucidate divergent interpretations of exchange and reciprocity that equate loyalty with the logic of the Maussian gift. For both Cristina-ists and their Kirchnerist critics, Randazzo's or Cristina's actions had failed to comply with the obligations of the gift. The internal debates over the case of Randazzo's refusal suggests that populist unity is perpetually threatened by the emergence of competing interpretations of loyalty that posit conflicting conceptions of obligation, generosity, solidarity, and gratitude. [Kirchnerism, populism, Argentina, loyalty, betrayal, exchange, reciprocity, personalism, obedience]

The traitor occupies the classic position of the utopian hero; a man from nowhere, the traitor lives between two loyalties; he lives in a double entendre, in disguise. He ought to feign it, to remain in the barren land of perfidy, sustained by the impossible dreams of a future in which his baseness will, at least, be rewarded. But in what way will the traitor's ill deeds be rewarded in the future?

—Piglia (1994), *Respiración Artificial*¹

A Traitorous Correspondence

On June 18, 2015, *Clarín*, the most circulated newspaper in Argentina, published a letter written by Florencio Randazzo, the Minister of the Interior and Transportation, addressed to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the president of Argentina and leader of the *Frente para la Victoria* (Front for Victory) party, or FpV. The letter, suspected of having been leaked by Randazzo himself, explained that although he would retract his candidacy for the party's nomination for president, as Cristina had apparently asked of him, he refused to fully comply with all of her *voluntad* (wishes)—he would not accept her offer to be the party's candidate for governor of the Province of Buenos Aires. Such a refusal was understood by many as an act of treachery counter to the principles of the Peronist tradition to which Randazzo and Cristina belong.

Due to a constitutional proscription on occupying the presidency for more than two consecutive four-year terms, Cristina, as Argentines refer to her, could not run for president, herself. Consequently, while many Argentines believed that her plan was to run for president again in the future (perhaps as soon as 2019) they had anxiously awaited a placeholder or an emissary—someone who could occupy the presidency while she plotted her return to power. They hoped that the party's candidate for 2015 would be an individual pledging continued loyalty to Cristina and representing the principles of Kirchnerism—a center-left iteration of Argentina's long tradition of Peronist populism. Many of them had believed Randazzo was the best choice for this role.

Yet, to many Kirchnerists, Randazzo's letter exposed him as a traitor who failed to fulfill the obligations of *lealtad* (loyalty) central to Peronist doctrine and practice. For Peronist *militantes* (militants), as political activists are called, loyalty to the Peronist Movement consists of the love fellow Peronist militants have for each other, and the love they have for their leader, the conductor, or, as Cristina is called, the *Conductora Estratégica* (Strategic Conductor).² Peronist loyalty is, therefore, at once traversed by the egalitarianism of fellowship and alliance, and the deeply hierarchical structure of organization advocated by the founder of Peronism, Juan Domingo Perón. Those accusing Randazzo of betrayal emphasized that the former was wholly contingent upon the latter—fellowship was impossible without utter allegiance to Cristina. Yet, some militants defended Randazzo, suggesting that loyalty to a leader should not be the measure of one's loyalty to the movement and political project they lead. Cristina, they believed, had acted disloyally to her fellow Kirchnerist by refusing him the possibility of running for president.

In this essay, I draw on semistructured and structured interviews, as well as extensive participant observation carried out with militants from various Kirchnerist political associations between 2012 and 2016 to analyze the interpretations of Randazzo's letter by self-described "Kirchnerist militants." The majority of the data presented in this article occurred in the local headquarters of Kirchnerist political associations, which serve as the nuclei of militant social life. Through my findings, I contend that recriminating and laudatory interpretations of the letter underline tensions between dynamics of political brotherhood and hierarchy that produce conflicting interpretations of loyalty and betrayal. These interpretations elucidate how Kirchnerist and Peronist conceptions of loyalty and betrayal are guided by notions of reciprocity, sacrifice, and obligation—normative expectations of exchange outlined in *The Gift* of Mauss (1990). While militants disagreed as to whether Randazzo or Cristina had acted inappropriately, they all believed that someone had refused to comply with the rules that govern gift economies.

Kirchnerist militants are members of the dozens of political associations and labor unions affiliated with the Kirchnerist Movement, or the *Proyecto Nacional y Popular* (National and Popular Project). Here, I will describe the reactions of militants from two political associations—the Evita Movement and La Cámpora. Militants belonging to these two political associations had drastically opposing perceptions of Cristina and Randazzo's actions, demonstrating conflicting conceptions of reciprocity, obligation, loyalty, and betrayal. As we will see, these divergent interpretations of Randazzo's letter revealed stark differences between personalist Kirchnerists and those skeptical of conceiving of Cristina as a flawless leader.³

After Cristina's second electoral victory in 2011, Kirchnerism had become increasingly characterized by an emphasis on personalist loyalty to Cristina, known as *Cristinismo* (Cristina-ism)—the belief that only a single individual (in this case,

Cristina) is capable of leading and representing the Kirchnerist Movement and “the people.” As different militants’ readings of the letter demonstrate, different factions of the Movement did not have the same opinion of the growing influence of Cristina-ism. It is unsurprising that militants of the La C mpora took a Cristina-ist approach to Randazzo’s actions. One of the founding leaders of the association is M ximo Kirchner—the son of N stor and Cristina Kirchner, the founders of Kirchnerism. For *compa eros* (comrades, fellows) of La C mpora, allegiance is not simply a metaphorical relationship of kinship but a consanguine relation with the leader of the Movement.⁴ The Evita Movement, on the other hand, perceives itself as predating the emergence of Kirchnerism. Militants from this political association articulate their understanding of loyalty as a commitment to the National and Popular Project, not as a personalist commitment to Cristina.

Tensions between these political associations predated Randazzo’s letter. In the year leading up to the 2015 elections, the rivalry between these two groups was often articulated in terms of socioeconomic class: Members of La C mpora were criticized as “white and blond,” middle class, and far removed from the realities of the *sectores populares* (popular sectors); some militants from more Cristina-ist political associations thought of militants of the Evita Movement as dependent on social welfare programs, motivated by clientelism.

As scholars across various disciplines passionately opine about the populist wave redefining politics across regions and ideologies, reactions to Randazzo’s letter clarify the social relations of populist political communities. This essay makes a distinctively ethnographic contribution to understanding the elision between populism and personalism, and the internal conflicts this elision produces. While populism and personalism are distinct concepts, I consider how populist cosmologies morph into personalist interpretations of political representation that create division within a supposedly united movement by conflating allegiance with loyalty. This examination of Kirchnerist militancy does so by foregrounding how political community is predicated on inviolable obligations subject to contesting interpretations, such that one’s actions are perceived as treasonous by some, and noble by others.

Studies of Populism, Personalism, and Fellowship

Studies of populism across disciplines have grappled with its polysemic applications to diverse and even conflicting political projects. Following Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018), this essay does not understand “populism” as referring to a specific ideology; rather, I understand it as referring to “a way of constructing the political” (Laclau 2005, xi), a political logic that positions a heterogeneous alliance that represents “the people” against a shared antagonist (74). Readings of Randazzo’s

letter reveal that this antagonism can be turned inward, as former allies come to be viewed as untrustworthy and treacherous.⁵

In anthropology, the theme of populism has been addressed both directly and indirectly. While some anthropologists have explicitly engaged with the theme of populist politics (Albro 2000; Chowdhury 2019; Morris 2012; Rosa and Bonilla 2017; Samet 2013, 2019; Samet and Schiller 2017; Sánchez 2016; Song 2010), our discipline's general interests in political systems, social crisis, and community render our work an innately meaningful contribution to how we understand the appeal and rising influence of populist parties and movements across the world (Mazzarella 2019). Political anthropologies of Latin American politics have long emphasized the centrality of ritual, rhetoric, and state fetishism in political practices and discourse (Coronil 1997; Coronil and Skurski 1991; Lomnitz 2001; Sánchez 2016; Taussig 1997). Much of this work presents the role of the *caudillo* (strongman) as central to the authoritarian traditions of Latin American statecraft that persist in periods of democracy. These contributions clarify the cultural genealogy of personalism—the historical and social processes by which a figure comes to represent the “visible incarnation of the community . . . bringing about the self-formation of the people” (Sánchez 2016, 29). Contributing to this robust body of work, my investigation of Randazzo's supposed betrayal elucidates how personalist fetishizations of the leader shape populist cosmologies. Reactions to Randazzo's letter illustrate how these cosmologies reify individuals, investing them with superhuman abilities—as uniquely capable of representing popular will (Chatterjee 2019; Müller 2014; Sánchez 2016).

This essay is certainly not the first intervention to use Peronism as an example of populism. The historian Finchelstein has argued that when Peronism initially assumed power in 1946, it was the “first populist regime in history” (2017, 102). Since its birth, scholars inside and outside of Argentina have contemplated its enduring appeal. A significant quantity of historical and sociological examinations of Peronist politics has emphasized its ritualization of loyalty, focusing on how rhetoric and practice reinforce affective bonds between Peronists (Plotkin 1993; Podetti, Qués, and Sagol 1988). My work is most inspired by ethnographic engagements with Peronism that have foregrounded the primacy of loyalty, solidarity, and obedience in the Peronist cosmology (Auyero 2001; Balbi 2007; Frederic 2008), as well as work that has been attentive to the crises of distrust that erode bonds of Peronist fellowship. This latter literature elucidates how distrust manifests as accusations of infiltration and betrayal that foment sectarian divides (Boivin, Rosato, and Balbi 1998; Sigal and Verón 1986).

By reexamining themes of loyalty, betrayal, and sectarianism, my analysis of Randazzo's letter draws particular attention to the role of obligation and reciprocity in Peronist loyalty. Through militants' interpretations of Randazzo's letter, we will see how contested notions of loyalty and betrayal are

predicated on different and conflicting understandings of exchange, debt, and sacrifice.

The Problem of Peronist Loyalty

Peronist militants historically have an obsessive preoccupation with loyalty and betrayal. They are intent on apprehending the world of politics according to a moralizing discourse of right and wrong. Within this discourse, while the enemy is condemned, the traitor is presented as particularly nefarious—he has acted deceptively, having passed as a loyal *compañero* until a brazen act of treachery has thrust his or her truly corrupt nature into relief. The perpetual preoccupation with the existence of traitors suggests that seemingly affectionate and loyal comrades act in malignant ways, poisoning the integrity of the Movement and violating the sacrosanct bonds of Peronist fellowship. As an intrinsically polluting element, the traitor is a particularly “wicked object of reprobation,” whose polluting act has “endangered others” by putting the integrity of social cohesion at risk (Douglas 2003).

As the anthropologist Balbi has argued, conceptualizations of Peronist loyalty are deeply informed by the experience of what Peronists call “the Resistance”—the eighteen years between 1955 and 1973 during which Perón was exiled from Argentina and the Peronist party (formerly known as the Justicialist Party) was banned from electoral politics (2007, 280–83). Often hailed as a time of great solidarity among Peronists, the Resistance also revealed profound differences in the interpretation of Peronist doctrine among the diverse social sectors of the Movement. In the absence of the *Gran Conductor* (Great Conductor), the Movement was riddled with power struggles as different figures attempted to define its ideological orientation (Balbi 2007, 139–40; James 1988, 159–248).

In such a context, what it meant to be a loyal Peronist differed according to which faction of Peronism one belonged. Different types of Peronists read situations differently, ascribing different meanings to individuals’ actions, and defining loyalty and betrayal according to distinct and conflicting interpretations. As we will see, the case of Randazzo’s “betrayal” throws into relief the fundamental sectarianism that resides below the appearance of alliance and brotherhood exalted by Peronist rhetoric.

The Primary That Never Was

In early 2015, various figures within Kirchnerism expressed interest in running in the Front for Victory’s presidential primary. Cristina had never clearly groomed an heir, nor had she articulated a clear plan of succession. Accordingly, militants

did not talk about who would be the Strategic Conductor after she was out of office, instead repeating the slogan that the *el candidato es el proyecto* (Candidate Is the Project). This slogan implied that the identity of the candidate was not of importance; rather, it was the continuity of the National and Popular Project that mattered. In May 2015, Cristina publicly asked for those considering running to have *humildad* (humility). Her words were interpreted as a request for those with limited chances of winning to drop out of the primary. Following the wishes of the Strategic Conductor, all but two candidates abandoned the race: Florencio Randazzo and Daniel Scioli.

In the months leading up to Cristina's decision to forego a primary, the vast majority of militants I knew told me that they were planning to vote for Randazzo, even though Scioli had a stronger chance of winning the general elections. While lauding Randazzo for his loyalty to Cristina, they often referred to Scioli as "El Manco" in bitter jest—a nickname that translates as "amputee" and connotes a lack. The use of this nickname implied a degree of informality, as if they were speaking of someone with whom they had long been familiar. It was also quite cruel, as Scioli, who had always been a man of considerable wealth, had lost his hand in a speedboat accident in the 1990s.

Scioli's accident seemed to comically and tragically exemplify the moral corruption of the Justicialist Party in the 1990s during the time of Peronist Carlos Menem's presidency—a decade many Argentines call the era of "pizza and champagne" in reference to its juxtaposition of Menem's folksy disposition with his ostentatious taste for luxury. Kirchnerists refer to Menemism—characterized by dollarization, privatization of industry, neoliberal economic policies, and *relaciones carnales* (carnal relations) with the United States—as a false and treacherous Peronism. Yet, during Menem's regime, while many Peronists denounced his words and actions as utterly treacherous (Frederic 2008, 65; DiTella 2004, 167), he enjoyed the support of the vast majority of Peronists and party functionaries—including, for many years, the Kirchners. Yet, Kirchnerist militants starkly contrast Kirchnerism with Menemism, depicting the former as saving Peronism from the traitorous disgrace of the latter.

For many militants I spoke to, Scioli continued to represent an unpalatable reminder of the traitorous Peronism of the 1990s. He flirted with many of Cristina's enemies; his fealty had often been called into question. Some even went as far as to express disapproval of his administration of the Province of Buenos Aires, launching an unsuccessful primary challenge against him in 2011. In contrast, although Randazzo had roots in Peronist politics going back to the 1990s, he had not been as high profile of a figure on the national stage as Scioli, and rose to national prominence under Cristina's government. He exemplified a faithful militant work ethic and energized the militant base. Many Kirchnerists felt the

primary race to be a competition between a more ideal candidate, and a cynical, more viable competitor.

Given Cristina's seemingly doting disposition toward Randazzo and cold demeanor toward Scioli, her undemocratic intervention in the primary was shocking. While she had apparently demanded that Scioli choose Carlos Zannini as his running mate—a man considered to be a close confidante of the Kirchners—her choice was still surprising. Thus, upon finding out that Cristina had told her beloved functionary to withdraw from the primary to give the candidacy to someone she seemed to loathe, many Kirchnerists had to now justify their intent to vote for Scioli after speaking ill of him for years.

"I Am a Man of My Word"

By noon of June 18, 2015, everyone I encountered wanted to talk about Randazzo's letter, which they had read in the newspaper that morning. That evening, I attended a weekly *formación política* (political formation) meeting in a local headquarters, or *unidad básica* (UB), of La Cámpora. These types of meetings usually include informal dialogue about current events; it is also at these meetings that leaders of the political association *bajar línea* (lower the line) and reinforce the principle of *organcidad* (organicity), or *orgánico* (being organic)—the principle of adhering to a deeply hierarchical structure, and a term that militants told me comes from the verb *organizar* (to organize) in the sense of forming part of the verticalist structure of a political association and the Movement.⁶

This evening, approximately twenty individuals were in attendance. The leader of the UB, the *responsable*, had printed out a copy of the letter to be read aloud. Ana María, a militant in her seventies, forcefully raised her hand, enthusiastically volunteering to read. Assuming a solemn tone, she delivered its contents, her somber and disapproving countenance reflecting the seriousness of Randazzo's offense.

I provide an abridged version of the letter below:

Dear Cristina,

Since that 10th of December of 2007 [when you assumed office], the day in which you chose me to accompany you, until today, I have become the Minister of the Interior, later of the Interior and Transportation, who has occupied this post for more time than any other in the last 60 years.

This privilege that you awarded me allowed me to transmit in these lines some ideas and decisions.

It was through Néstor that I saw, expressed in reality, how politics had earned a central place, and how decisions were, once again, being made by the House of Government. And it was through you that I saw a president with independence and

autonomy. Independence and autonomy from powerful interests in the media and the economy, that attempted, and continue to attempt, to limit you.

It is for these reasons that I devoted my body and soul, in these years, to defending each and every one of the actions that we carried forward Because of my commitment to you and to the [National and Popular] Project I think that the best way to contribute was by participating in a primary election that would lay bare the idea of continuing with each and every one of our accomplishments.

I am a man of my word. I fervently believe in its value and that to which one has committed. Given that you have clearly shown that [a primary election] is not your wish (*voluntad*), I accept with sadness but without the smallest bit of resentment that I am not able to compete for the presidency, and I celebrate the decision that it be Carlos Zannini who will become a guarantee that nothing of what has been accomplished will be lost. He is a friend in whom we can trust. Just as you have requested, I will accompany you until the end of your term, until the 10th of December, to continue transforming [the country], because my commitment to you, Cristina, is unbreakable. I respect you as a militant, I admire you as a president and I love (*querer*) you as a person.

I am a man of my word. I fervently believe in its innate value and that to which one is committed. I do not erase with the elbow what I write with my hand. Thus, I cannot accept the candidacy of governor of the province of Buenos Aires. And just as I had said publicly, after the 10th of December I will continue to defend the project from my place as [a] militant.

I will continue to defend you tooth and nail, always I am proud to be part of this project that already occupies a place in history. And of having made my contribution, with enormous sacrifice and dedication, to the National and Popular model which you conduct.

But at the same time, I feel the obligation of honoring my convictions and my 35 years of militancy. I cannot renounce (*renunciar*) that which I feel and which I think. We have spoken of this many times As [a] militant, I will always be on the side of those that are least fortunate. I will be accompanying the millions of Argentinians who trusted us.

I arrived with you to the Casa Rosada (House of Government) and I will leave with you. Without leaving my convictions at its door.⁷ And, [as] you know, this does not have a price. That is what Néstor taught us.

I embrace you with the affection and loyalty of always.

—Florencio Randazzo

As Ana María read, her compañeros snarled, intervening with cutting remarks referring to Randazzo's attitude as *inmadura* (immature) and *individualista* (individualistic). Individuals who, in the preceding months, had previously claimed that Randazzo was the presidential candidate most loyal to Cristina

now excoriated his treacherous nature. “*Qué traidor!*” (“What a traitor!”), they interjected at various points during the reading. Some of the Camporistas contended that it was not simply the content of the letter that was treacherous but also its very form of address. The letter was obviously meant for publication and had never been a genuine attempt at personal correspondence. Moreover, as a public epistolary address published in the pages of a newspaper detested and demonized by Kirchnerists, the letter provided fodder for anti-Peronists eager to point out the Movement’s weaknesses. It was a public exposure of internal discord—a brazen act of insubordination.

Yet, in the letter, Randazzo clearly articulates his commitment to the political project of Kirchnerism—the National and Popular Project. He says he loves Cristina, and will remain loyal to her in the future. At the same time, he implicitly questions the ethics of Cristina’s request, depicting his refusal of her wishes as a steadfast commitment to keeping his word that he sought no other office but the presidency. This commitment to his word, he claims, is grounded in his long history of militancy—his refusal to fully comply with Cristina’s will is necessary if he is to act with sincerity, if he is to maintain a genuine commitment to his convictions. When Randazzo claims that to accept the party’s nomination as gubernatorial candidate would be to “erase with the elbow that which was written with the hand,” he declares that satisfying Cristina’s wishes would render him a hypocrite, a traitor to his principles—and to those of Néstor. By appealing to Néstor’s authority to justify his refusal of Cristina’s wishes, Randazzo presents himself as a more loyal Kirchnerist than Cristina by suggesting that a Cristina-ist conception of loyalty would be at odds with her husband’s wishes. Thus, while many Kirchnerists viewed his refusal of Cristina’s will (*voluntad*) to be a violation of a militant ethic, he suggests the opposite—contending that Cristina is violating an ethical code through her interference in the primary process. Locating sincerity and commitment on his side, he also suggests that Scioli (whom he never once names or endorses) has no such principled commitments. He, unlike the Camporistas, engages in no declarations of support for the one chosen by the Strategic Conductor.

There were clearly two competing interpretations of Randazzo’s letter, and implicitly, Cristina’s actions. The opinion held by most Kirchnerist militants was that Randazzo privileged his personal ambitions over the collective good, staging a public break with their leader at a vulnerable and delicate moment when the future of the National and Popular Project was at risk. The rival interpretation of Randazzo’s letter implied that Cristina had betrayed their common ideals by making a cynical choice and selecting an unprincipled candidate; this interpretation cast Cristina as guilty of betraying the trust of her loyal disciple for having refused him that which he was owed.

Militants Go Wherever the Strategic Conductor Sends Them

For the Camporistas reading the letter aloud, Randazzo's words were not even remotely taken seriously as a genuine demonstration of sincerity or loyalty. They dismissed his claims of enduring loyalty as false, silly, and deceptive. At the same time, they seemed to be talking themselves through their own reluctance to vote for Scioli out loud, as if they had to reassure both themselves and each other of the faultlessness of their Strategic Conductor's decisions. Two important facts had been revealed by Cristina's and Randazzo's actions: First, Randazzo was fundamentally incapable of being a strong and reliable leader, as revealed through the impropriety of the letter; knowing of Randazzo's shortcomings, Cristina had rightly decided that he was not fit to be the candidate, let alone president. This analysis concluded that Cristina was omnisciently privy to knowledge and information to which ordinary people were not. Second, these Camporistas asserted that a militant does whatever the Strategic Conductor asks of them. As follows, if Randazzo had betrayed them by refusing this maxim, they, in contrast, would not fail as he had, and vote for Scioli without reservation.

A young woman in her early twenties, clearly emotionally wrought over the dramatic developments of the day, described in a tone of measured and stern determination her intentions in the following words, which were reiterated by many present: "Scioli will be my president, and I will vote for him because Cristina has made him the candidate, and put Zannini [with him] to keep him in line. But, of course, even with Scioli as president, Cristina will continue to be my Strategic Conductor. It is also our job as militants to keep [Scioli] in line." Another militant, assenting to the young woman's preceding statement with reassuring nods of the head, exclaimed that "militants go wherever the Strategic Conductor sends them." Their words expressed a firmly personalist interpretation of loyalty that exalted unyielding obedience to Cristina.

Others chimed in that they, too, would vote for El Manco, assuring themselves and each other that to follow Cristina's will was of the utmost importance. Surely, Zannini would be a check on Scioli, as "Cristina had put him there for a reason, as part of her strategy." Their party's electoral victory hinged on Kirchnerists' willingness to vote for a man whom they had long suspected to be of dubious loyalty, and the desperation in their voices exposed that they found the situation nothing short of tragic. They were, in a sense, being asked to betray their own word, just as Randazzo had claimed Cristina had asked of him. Personalist loyalty, therefore, demanded ideological incongruence out of allegiance.

Fed up with militants continued use of "El Manco" to refer to Scioli, the responsible severely admonished the use of this offensive nickname: "The compañero Daniel suffered an accident that could easily have happened to any one of us," he admonished, in a tone that seemed self-aware of the ridiculousness

of the statement. He emphasized the word *compañero* in a deliberate and drawn out manner that only further colored it with an irony that he was hoping to eradicate. While Randazzo, a formerly admired and beloved *compañero* had been renamed *traidor* (traitor), Scioli had gone from *manco* to *compañero*. The responsible seemed acutely aware of the absurdity of the situation, but he had to severely reinforce these shifts in nomination among his followers, which reflected the previously unfathomable situation in which militants found themselves: their Strategic Conductor had told her supposedly unwaveringly loyal heir to step aside and make way for someone many militants had euphemistically stated as being *promiscuo con sus lealtades* (promiscuous with his loyalties).

Ninety minutes after the meeting had begun, a militant who would always arrive late, hurried into the UB seemingly impervious to the strikingly funereal mood. The door slammed behind him as he sauntered into the middle of the UB. He shrugged. “So, it’s settled, right? The Strategic Conductor has made the decision: We’re all going to vote for El Manco!”

The Refusal of the Gift

While the start of Randazzo’s political career predates the birth of Kirchnerism, many Kirchnerists claimed that Randazzo had acted in a manner that revealed him to be *desagradecido* (ungrateful). His refusal of Cristina’s offer had thrown into relief that he cared more about his own pride than Cristina’s generosity and the well-being of the Movement. According to this narrative, Randazzo owed Cristina “everything.” “Without Cristina, Randazzo is nobody. He didn’t exist politically before she made him what he is now,” Marcos tells me. Marcos was not formally aligned with any political association, but had worked in the Kirchnerist State for a few years and considered himself to be a militant. His parents were advisors to the Front for Victory Party, and his father had a background in trade union organizing. For him, as for my Camporista interlocutors, Randazzo’s refusal undeniably constituted betrayal—he lacked gratitude for his benefactor.

To better understand this dynamic between gratitude and refusal, I will turn to Mauss’ seminal work on exchange. *The Gift*’s sustained relevance within the discipline of anthropology speaks to the vital importance of obligation and reciprocity in the foundation and maintenance of social relationships. For the purposes of this essay, I want to consider how the Maussian conception of the gift—and the strict obligations it entails—clarifies the relationship between honor, generosity, and obedience.

Reciprocation, Mauss claimed, is the “balancing of accounts” (1990, 14), the paying off of a debt. According to the logic of my Kirchnerist militant interlocutors, either Cristina or Randazzo had failed to pay off a debt they had to

the other. They had broken a relationship of alliance with each other by failing to observe the obligations that gift exchange demands of its participants. “To refuse to give,” writes Mauss, “to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality” (1990, 13). Echoing Mauss, Sahlins has claimed that the gift is, at once, “alliance, solidarity, communion” and a “political contract” (1972, 169). Yet, alongside these relationships of “alliance, solidarity, and communion,” Mauss warns, the gift is imbued with an agonistic spirit. While the potlatch most extravagantly demonstrates the antagonism that underlies systems of exchange (1990, 37), the potential for enmity and the spirit of competition underlies even the most seemingly selfless of gifts. This spirit of rivalry and antagonism, contends Pitt-Rivers, even resides within friendship, or fellowship, threatening to undo bonds of affection (2016). The unravelling of social relations that results from the failure to comply with all three obligations of gift exchange is always a possibility—fellowship is always at risk.

According to Camporistas’ interpretation of his letter, Randazzo had refused to receive the gift of the gubernatorial candidacy Cristina had generously offered to him. His refusal to accept the offer was a refusal to pledge his full loyalty to Cristina—to give that which was due to his Strategic Conductor. Such a reading demonstrated a personalist interpretation of Peronist loyalty, equating unwavering allegiance to Cristina with loyalty to the Movement. Conversely, militants of the Evita Movement viewed Cristina as failing to reciprocate Randazzo’s loyalty and refusing to give him what was rightfully his. Both perspectives accused the other party of failing to give a countergift in return for the other’s loyalty. For Mauss and for Pierre Bourdieu, this failure is fundamentally dishonorable—a negation of a social relation that may be interpreted as act of enmity or even war (Bourdieu 1990, 100; Mauss 1990, 37–38).

The more personalist orientation of Camporistas exposes the belief that what the Strategic Conductor gives cannot be repaid. The perception of the populist leader as exceptional illustrates general characteristics of personalism that Jan-Werner Müller argues are central to populist notions of political representation (2014). Lomnitz more explicitly ties the strongman (or woman) leader to generosity and selflessness. It is “through personal sacrifice,” he claims, that the leader—particularly the Latin American leader—can make a claim to have the “capacity to represent the entire nation” (Lomnitz 2001, 89). In his anthropological examination of Mexican nationalism, Lomnitz argues that “viable examples of the presidential persona were built around the figure of the martyr” (2001, 94). Marcos described Cristina’s involvement in politics, as many other militants would, as not motivated by personal ambition but rather a wholly selfless undertaking: “She could be retired at home in Patagonia. The plan was that Néstor would be the candidate in 2011 But, despite having lost that which she most loved [her

husband], she understood that she was needed and put the personal aside for the [National and Popular] Project and the people (*el pueblo*).”⁸

Sacrifice, Mauss wrote, “is an act of giving that is necessarily reciprocated” (1990, 16). Militants express gratitude for Cristina’s sacrifice through loyalty to her and to the Movement. Marcos espouses a personalist interpretation of loyalty, which dictates that militants are expected to express full dedication to her to as an act of reciprocation for her incomparable selflessness:

Cristina was looking at the polls and she said, “Man, you’re not measuring [well in the polls], but Daniel [Scioli] is.” If she had let there be a primary, she would be putting all of her political capital—everything she and her husband had built, and which her husband died for—into Randazzo. Randazzo would lose the primary or the presidential election and that would be the end of the [National and Popular] Project, the end of Cristina, the end of Kirchnerism. Randazzo losing to Scioli in the primary would mean that Scioli would not be beholden to Kirchnerism, and then there wouldn’t be a Kirchnerist candidate for president. What was she supposed to do? Waste her political capital on Florencio Randazzo, a man who cannot let go of being president and could destroy the Movement in the process? And now his attitude is “fuck the Movement, the Movement isn’t important to me, but my ambitions are.”

In contrast to Kirchners’ steadfast fealty to the Project, Randazzo had shown himself to be a reckless individualist, who, now that his personal whims had not been properly attended to, treacherously abandoned his responsibility to the Movement and his fellow militants.

Marcos went on to explain to me that it was “known among many” that Cristina personally detested Scioli. Her very decision to crown him as the presidential candidate was yet another example of a significant sacrifice she had made on behalf of the Movement. She, personally, could not stand disappointing Randazzo, or satisfying the untrustworthy Scioli, but she had to enact what was best for the Movement, not what she most desired.

According to Peronist tradition, unyielding loyalty to the conductor of the movement has, as its condition of possibility, the conductors’ loyalty and dedication to the Argentine people (Balbi 2007, 118)—loyalty to the conductor is a modest response to Cristina’s immeasurable loyalty. Personalism depicts the leader as singularly generous, giving a gift of loyalty to “the people” that can never be totally repaid—his or her followers are in a relationship of perpetual indebtedness. Randazzo, and those defending him, question this relationship, believing that a less hierarchical relationship between Strategic Conductor and militant is the fullest expression of fellowship and loyalty.

Reactions to Randazzo’s letter reveal how populist and personalist notions of loyalty, fellowship, treachery, and obedience are shaped by the Maussian obligations

of the gift. The existence of opposing interpretations of the letter is indicative of a tension that inevitably resides within the heart of populist movements. While these movements reify loyalty, perceptions of loyalty are not uniform, just as obligations of exchange are universally valued, yet interpreted differently. “Evita” Perón, the matriarch of Peronism, famously declared in a *renuncia* (refusal) of her own, “If the people asked me for my life I would give it to them singing”—an iconic demonstration of humility that Randazzo, as a well-versed Peronist, clearly has in mind in his epistolary performance of modesty.⁹ Yet, for militants of La Cámpora, he could not be further from Evita’s saintly example. His ignoble selfishness violates the obligation to receive and to reciprocate by giving the countergift of obedience.

As If She Had Betrayed

Five months after the publication of Randazzo’s letter, the Kirchnerist party would lose the presidential election—as well as the majority of congressional seats and governorships across Argentina—in a shocking defeat. Perhaps the biggest surprise of the election was FpV’s defeat in the gubernatorial race in the Province of Buenos Aires—the first time Peronism had lost control of the Province of Buenos Aires in twenty-eight years. Many Kirchnerists blamed Randazzo: If he had run for governor, he would have won and encouraged an enthusiastic turnout for the FpV presidential ticket. Those critical of Cristina-ism similarly perceived a relationship of causality—Cristina’s emphasis on personalist loyalty had marginalized sectors of the Movement, causing a humiliating defeat. If before the elections, many Kirchnerists were privately critical of the growing influence of Cristina-ism, after the elections, some openly questioned Cristina’s strategy, expressing public disapproval of her authoritarian interference in the primary. Many called for a moment of “self-criticism,” implying that the Strategic Conductor had proven to be a poor strategist.

Martín, a militant of the Evita Movement in his late twenties, conveyed his frustration with Cristina’s actions leading up to the elections. “After she told Randazzo to get out of the race, for days, I couldn’t look at her when she would appear on television. I felt such disappointment, as if she had betrayed me.” Using the subjunctive tense, Martín stopped short of accusing Cristina of treason. He had been a passionate supporter of Randazzo’s presidential ambitions, and felt deeply disappointed that he had not gotten the chance to vote for his candidate. Six months after my conversation with Martín, the Evita Movement would break away from the FpV to form a party of its own, *Peronistas para la Victoria* (Peronists for Victory). In the memorandum announcing its departure from the FpV, the Evita Movement claimed that it would continue to work for the National and Popular Project, while clearly criticizing the increasing Cristina-ism of Kirchnerism—which they

explicitly blamed for the electoral failure. Unsurprisingly, their departure from FpV rendered them traitors in the eyes of Cristina-ists.

For Martín, while Cristina's decision not to hold a primary for the Kirchnerist Party significantly contributed to the party's loss in the congressional, presidential, and gubernatorial elections, it was most significantly also the demonstration of a lack of loyalty on Cristina's part toward someone who had been such a loyal militant: Randazzo. It was she, and not her loyal functionary, who had been ungrateful and disloyal. For Martín, not only had Randazzo not acted treacherously, he had been betrayed by the benefactor whom he had served faithfully for years. He had told me he had "obviously" voted for Scioli, but what was upsetting to him was not the fact of casting a vote for a man he described as ideologically *tibio* (lukewarm); instead, it was the manner in which Randazzo had been treated.

Others were brazen enough to use the indicative rather than the subjunctive mood when describing Cristina's comportment. Fernando, a self-proclaimed "life-long Peronist militant," who did not formerly belong to a political association, declared that the elections—which he had predicted Kirchnerism would win by "enormous margins"—were lost because of "the greatest betrayal of all." I asked if really he believed his *renuncia* (renunciation, withdrawal) qualified as betrayal, or simply a problematization of personalist loyalty. "Randazzo! No, my daughter. I'm talking about Cristina!" After all the loyalty militants had demonstrated to her for years, Cristina had disappointed them and the Argentine people. She had seemed more preoccupied with her own legacy and Cristina-ist loyalty than the survival of a political project. Yet, despite the dramatic delivery of accusation, his whispering suggested that he would not make such a denunciation outside of the confidence of our relationship.

Conclusion: Who Has Betrayed?

Laclau contended that libidinal ties between members of a populist coalition and toward their leader have a leveling force, that, along with a shared external enemy, unites otherwise disparate factions (2005, 54–55). For Cristina-ists, these feelings of love for the leader preclude the possibility of dissent. Yet, for militants of the Evita Movement, Cristina had failed in her role as Strategic Conductor, as she had proven incapable of sustaining the variegated coalition upon which populist unity is predicated. I have turned to Mauss to think through how Cristina-ist conceptions of loyalty, and those critical of it, view the drama between Cristina and Randazzo as a violation of the obligations of exchange. A social contract had been broken and Kirchnerism descended into factionalism.

Kirchnerist militants' conceptions of exchange give us great insight into populist and personalist and political cosmologies, exposing an inherently antiliberal—and arguably antidemocratic—expression of political representation. I want to

conclude by suggesting that regimes in which leaders expect total obedience are intrinsically contrary to the representational regimes of liberal democracy. To justify Cristina's cancellation of the party primary takes the stance that a leader's preferences outweigh the importance of popular will expressed through democratic elections. Militants' deeply affective experience of politics, whether they adhere to personalist interpretations of loyalty or not, is indicative of a Schmittian brand of friend/enemy politics hostile toward dissent and pluralism, as rendered visible by the conflicting readings of Randazzo's letter.

In 2017, both Cristina and Randazzo competed to be senator of the Province of Buenos Aires. Randazzo had a relatively poor showing at the polls, yet the support his candidacy garnered among figures once associated with Kirchnerism, including the Evita Movement, signaled continued discontent with Cristina, who came in the second place, guaranteeing her a seat in the senate. In May 2019, Cristina announced that she would be a vice presidential candidate in the 2019 presidential elections, running alongside Alberto Fernández—her former chief of staff who had defected from Kirchnerism a decade earlier. Like Randazzo in his letter, Cristina's announcement of her decision to run as vice president cited Evita's famous *renuncia*. Placing presidential ambitions aside, she was making yet another sacrifice for the Movement. Cristina and Alberto Fernández would go on to handily win the presidential elections in October 2019, after forming a broad Peronist coalition that included the Evita Movement and Randazzo.

Yet, the threat of sectarian factiousness haunts these newly reformed alliances. As populism inevitably produces personalist proclivities, some will question the claim that a single person can represent "the people." Thus, behind the warm embrace of the Front for Everyone party, led by Cristina and her former chief of staff—a man who many of my interlocutors once called a "traitor"—lurks the menacing possibility that brotherhood might metamorphose into agonism.

Notes

¹The translation of this epigraph, as well as all quoted speech that appears in the text of this essay, are the work of the author.

²I translate *conductor/a* as "conductor" rather than "leader" in an attempt to be as faithful to the original Spanish as possible, as the vocabulary of Peronism has a specificity that marks those that use it as Peronist, and conveys the deeply hierarchical structure of a Peronist movement.

³I use the term *personalism* rather than personality cult for two central reasons: (1) it most approximates the Spanish word *personalismo*, and (2) it has a far less negative connotation. My intentions are not to express a value judgment of personalist politics but rather to give an ethnographic account of how this type of politics imagines relationships of alliance and hierarchy, fellowship, and allegiance.

⁴As explicitly requested by my Kirchnerist militant interlocutors, I have not translated *compañero* as "comrade." They told me *camaradas* (comrades) are what Trotskyists and Leftists are, while only Peronists are *compañeros*. For them, relationships of *compañerismo* (fellowship) are exclusively

relationships that demonstrate Peronist notions of brotherhood and communion, which only make sense within the constraints and historical specificities of Peronist loyalty.

⁵Laclau asserts that populist movements are perpetually at risk of devolving into sectarian conflict as constitutive parts of a populist coalition often come to perceive the political sphere differently. Thus, former allies begin to view each other as political adversaries. Different social sectors forming part of a populist movement may even express different views of the referent to which “the people” refers (2005, 108–110).

⁶In her ethnography of Argentine labor unions, Lazar describes the verticalism of organicity as the “notion that those at the lower ranks of an organization must follow the decisions made by those higher up, which provides an organization with the strength that comes from discipline” (2017, 118). Lazar’s interlocutors think of this organizational structure as inherently Peronist, drawing on concepts of discipline and obedience outline in Perón’s seminal text on political strategy, *Conducción Política* (2017, 120).

⁷In Néstor Kirchner’s inaugural address, given on May 25, 2003, he declared that he would “not leave his convictions behind at the door of the Casa Rosada.”

⁸Néstor Kirchner died of a heart attack on October 27, 2010—a year before the presidential elections. It was a commonly held belief among Argentines that Néstor would be the presidential candidate in 2011, so that the Kirchners could maintain the presidency as a husband-and-wife team while working around constitutional term limits.

⁹Leading up to Perón’s second election in 1951, many within the Peronist Movement called for a Perón-Perón ticket, with Eva Perón as the candidate for vice president. On August 22, 1951, Evita delivered a speech announcing that if she were to refuse this offer (as she would a few days later), it would not be a renunciation of *la lucha* (struggle) but of the honors such a title would bestow upon her.

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