Демократия, классовая борьба и антифашизм: Аргентинская коммунистическая партия и Народный фронт (1935–1946)

Democracy, Class Struggle and Antifascism: The Argentine Communist Party and the Popular Front (1935–1946)

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Аннотация: В статье рассматривается присутствие и влияние Коммунистической партии Аргентины в период с 1935 по 1946 год — решающий период, отмеченный проведением политики Народного фронта. Она стремится исправить «историографическую пустоту», предлагая глобальную интерпретацию этого периода, пересматривая распространённое представление эти лет, главным существом которых представлялось возникновение перонизма. Исследование подчёркивает, что КПА была центральным игроком с заметным влиянием на рабочее движение, интеллектуальную, университетскую, феминистскую и массовую культурную сферы. Организационной осью коммунистической деятельности была политика Народного фронта, принятая в 1935 г., кото-

рая подразумевала отказ от политики «класс против класса» в поиске союзов с «демократическими» партиями и «прогрессивными» секторами буржуазии против фашизма. Эта стратегия изменила физиономию КПА, побудив её к интеграции в политический режим и к превращению партии в часть системы. Статья раскрывает изменения в политике, ее напряжённость и противоречия, включая неоднозначную роль компартии в период нейтралитета и её трудности в удовлетворении «демократических» и «экономических» требований. Делается вывод, что та же политика, которая дала компратии силу и привела к участию в руководстве профцентра CGT (Confederación General del Trabajo), также отдалила ее от рабочих масс, подчинив себя партийному альянсу, возглавляемому радикалами, что способствовало ее последующему упадку перед лицом подъема перонизма.

Ключевые слова: Коммунистическая партия, Народный фронт, Аргентина, историография, перонизм

Abstract: The article examines the presence and influence of the Communist Party (CP) in Argentina between 1935 and 1946, a crucial period marked by the politics of the Popular Front. It seeks to fill a "historiographical gap" by offering a *comprehensive* interpretation of this period, *challenging* the deterministic retrospective view focused on the origins of Peronism. The research highlights the fact that the CP was a central actor with a notable impact on the labor movement, the intellectual, universitarian, feminist and mass culture spheres.The main axis of communist activity was the Popular Front orientation adopted in 1935, which implied an abandonment of "class against class" politics in order to seek alliances with "democratic" parties and "progressive" sectors of the bourgeoisie against fascism. This strategy transformed the organisational profile of the CP, fostering its integration into the political regime and promoting the ‘citizenization’ of its identity. However, the article reveals the modulations, tensions and contradictions of this policy, including the ambiguous role of the CP in the neutralist period and its difficulty in reconciling

"democratic" and "economic" demands. It is concluded that the same policy that gave it strength and led it to co-lead the CGT (Confederación General del Trabajo) also alienated it from the workers by subordinating it to an alliance led by the democratic-bourgeois Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), contributing to its subsequent decline with the rise of Peronism.

Keywords: Communist Party, Popular Front, Argentina, Historiography, Peronism.

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Any analysis of Argentina's social, political, and cultural history in the 1930s and 1940s must take into account the Communist Party (CP), whose influence was inescapable across multiple spheres during this period.

By 1942 the CP was already co-leading the Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT) and leading some of the main industrial unions in the country. Among them was the Federación Obrera Nacional de la Construcción (FONC).[1] Within the intellectual world, the communist presence stands out in different organizations of the time, such as the Association of Intellectuals, Artists, Journalists and

[1] Camarero and Ceruso, 2020.

Writers (AIAPE)[2] , which brought together prominent playwrights, poets, doctors and lawyers. At the universitarian level, communist militants were to be found among the leadership of the Federación Universitaria Argentina (FUA) and in the *student federations* of the most important universities in the country, such as the National Universities of Buenos Aires, La Plata, Córdoba, Rosario and Tucumán.[3] In the field of the feminist movement, the presence of the CP in some of the most significant groups of those years, such as the Unión Argentina de Mujeres (UAM) and the Junta de la Victoria (JV), stands out.[4] Finally, if we look at the cultural world of Argentina in the 1930s, we can see the link between local communism and organizations and leaders in the fields of film, radio, theatre and even football, which were part of the "mass culture" during those decades. [5]

The CP was undoubtedly one of the central actors in Argentine history during that time. The period of its Popular Front policy (1935–1946) represents one of the most significant experiences of the local left in the 20th century. Although valuable studies have approached this period from different perspectives, there has been no comprehensive interpretation to date.[6] This article highlights some defining features of the era, synthesizing the conclusions of my doctoral research in an effort to address this historiographical gap.

Addressing this subject involves certain historiographical challenges. The emergence of Peronism is often said to have coincided with the decline of communist political influence. By the mid-1940s, indeed, the CP had lost much of the presence described above. The central question is therefore: what occurred during the intense decade between the mid-1930s and the mid-1940s? A review

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[2] Cane, 1997; Andrés Bisso and Celentano, 2006; Pasolini, 2013; Petra, 2017.

[3] Califa, 2014.

[4] Valobra, 2015; McGee Deutsch, 2012; Becerra, 2020.

[5] Alle, 2019; Sarlo, 1988; Devés, 2020.

[6] Piemonte, 2016; Camarero, 2008; Ceruso, 2015.

of the major literature shows that this decisive moment in 20th-century Argentina has usually been analysed from the perspective of the origins of peronism.[7] The events were interpreted retrospectively from reference points such as 17th October 1945, the presidential elections of February 1946, or through particular phenomena. Our research takes the opposite route: while building on works that have been fundamental for understanding the period, we focus not on Peronism but on the history of the left, examining its interaction with the surrounding social, political, and cultural environment. This approach allows us to contextualise the scope, limits, contradictions, and conflicts that shaped the communist experience during these years.

To explore these dimensions, we emphasise what we see as the organising axis of communist activity during this stage: the Popular Front orientation adopted by the Communist International (CI) at its Seventh Congress in 1935 and replicated locally by the Argentine CP at its National Conference that August. At this congress, communism—an essential actor on the international stage with considerable trade-union strength worldwide—abandoned the so-called "class-against-class" policy. This shift opened the way for a strategy of rapprochement with "democratic" parties and "progressive" sectors of the bourgeoisie, in order to combat fascism jointly.[8]

This policy shaped both the spheres in which the CP intervened and its relations with other social and political actors, particularly the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR) and the Partido Socialista (PS). These parties, once denounced as "social fascists," were redefined as potential allies in an anti-fascist "democratic force." From the mid-1930s, the Popular Front became not only a subject of public debate but also a key factor in national politics and culture. Its association with the anti-fascist cause facilitated networks of contacts and collaborations—political, trade-union, and intellectual—that have been noted in previous studies.[9]

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[7] Murmis and Portantiero, 2004; Del Campo, 1983; Torre, 1990.

[8] Piro Mittelman, 2020.

[9] Bisso, 2007; Celentano, 2006; Piro Mittelman, 2022.

In this sense, this research is part of the broader field of communist studies, which have dealt with the study of the Communist Parties in relation to the CI—that is, as members of a global structure with its complexities, semantics and specific trajectories. On this point I have distanced myself both from those readings that saw the CP as a mechanical reproduction of the Cominternist directives (in many cases traversed by the interpretative coordinates of the Cold War, although with updates as in the case of Furet) and from those visions that, while criticising these readings, emphasised the local particularities of communisms. In recent decades, some syntheses have sought to move away from this perspective, although offering interpretations and case studies that are not always integrated into the same historiographical reading. [10]

My method of analysis recognizes the premise that the CP had a strong dependence on CI directives, but there were margins of action. The key questions are: what did Argentine communists actually do with those directives? What tensions and difficulties arose in applying them locally? What responses were developed to confront these challenges? It is within these tensions—at the very point where doctrinal formulation encounters practical implementation—that the specific features of the CP's trajectory can be discerned.

In light of these considerations, the central argument of this article is that Argentine communism's adoption of the Popular Front policy not only developed specific features and modulations that paralleled broader national dynamics but also had profound consequences for the party's organizational profile. This orientation, I argue, constitutes a key to understanding the CP's decline in the face of Peronism's rise.

The modulations of the Popular Front

A relatively widespread idea in those works that have dealt with the question of communism and the Popular Front at this stage, al-

[10] Smith, 2014; Pons and Smith, 2017, vol. 1; Concheiro, Modonesi, and Crespo, 2007; Wolikow, 2016; Wolikow and Ruget, 1998; Álvarez Vallejos, 2017.

beit mostly in a tangential way, is to characterize it in a homogeneous way. However, I have found, on the contrary, that this "moment" in the trajectory of Argentine communism was marked by various modulations, both in terms of the public discourse it adopted and the practical forms of its implementation. The definitions of the CP and its political practice were conditioned by a wide variety of factors. The indications of the Communist International, the specific dynamics of the social fields in which it established itself and the relationship with other political parties such as the PS, the UCR, and others, drew the boundaries of its activity. This network of interactions varied historically according to the internal dynamics of each of these elements.

Moreover, like any political orientation, it must be embodied by concrete subjects, whose capacity for assimilation and adoption is mediated by the inherent frictions in the passage between theoretical postulates and practical action. When in 1935 the CP adopted the Popular Front policy, some of its cadres and leaders continued to refer to the united front, demonstrating an inertia with respect to the preceding period; other militants referred to the "left bloc", expressing the resistance and difficulties in including radicalism in that coalition. [11]

Although the CP's turn to the front was explicitly motivated by the Kremlin's foreign policy, its physiognomy, and its concrete application by the vernacular communism, was traversed and conditioned by the specific features of the local reality. The first difficulties in this regard arose when fascism, a phenomenon that responded to the characteristics of European geopolitics, was identified with the Latin American context. Furthermore, the persistent idea of carrying out a revolution in stages, the first phase of which was anti-imperialist and democratic, also shaped the local adoption of the Kremlin's line. In a country dominated by British and American capital, fascism was no longer associated with imperialism, but instead with certain nuclei of the ruling classes , their intellectuals and insti-

[11] La Internacional, 1/5/1935; La Internacional, first half of December 1935.

tutions, which meant a confusing mixture between the two elements.[12] The idea that there were "progressive" bourgeois sectors, even those linked by various ties to imperialism, increased these contradictions, which in fact were dissipated by placing the idea of the "anti-imperialist struggle" on a secondary plane and privileging slogans centred on the "democratic struggle" over those that questioned the social and economic structure of Argentine capitalism. [13]

These tensions had their continuity in the redefinition of the political actors that were to make up the Popular Front, particularly the Socialists and Radicals. The inertia with respect to the previous period was expressed in the initial hesitation to define the scope of the confluence with those forces. However, towards the beginning of 1936 the hesitations were replaced by the certainty that the CP had to make explicit concessions and sacrifices in order to win the confidence of the socialists and radicals, giving in to their more radicalized positions, their criticisms of these parties and their exclusively proletarian rhetoric. Despite these efforts, the "democratic forces" were reluctant in this first stage to join forces with the communist movement, both because of their mistrust of the real intentions of communism and because of their own dynamics and objectives set in the previous period.

Notwithstanding those difficulties—or even as a result of them—the CP began to articulate a new position on the local political scene, which tended to present itself as an actor willing to act within the framework of constitutional legality and the bourgeois regime. This meant dispelling suspicions that its influence in the workers' movement would be used for insurrectionary acts or to attack the capitalist order. The May 1st 1936 rally, in which for the first time the Communists shared the stage with Socialists, Radicals and Democratic Progressives (in line with the French Popular Front), was in this sense a public and massive platform in which the CP was able to demonstrate that perspective, confirming that it would not ignite the strike movement that had shaken the Buenos Aires City in

[12] Contra-Fascismo, January-February 1937; Contra-Fascismo, 25/4/1936.

[13] Report presented to the 9th Congress of the CPA, 10/1/1938.

January of that year.[14]

After that mobilisation, the political situation began to be increasingly influenced by the projections of the imminent change of government stipulated for the presidential elections of 1937. That year, the impossibility of reaching an effective agreement with the Radicals and Socialists through the electoral process made it necessary for the CP to redefine the form that popular-front politics would take. The idea of the "Democratic Alliance", formulated by the party leadership at that time implied modifying the immediate scope and objectives of the Popular Front orientation, tending to identify the Front as a "movement" and its potential allies as all those willing to join in "democratic" or "anti-fascist" action—from the boycott of German products to internal pressure on the government of Roberto Ortiz.[15] This readjustment in the party orientation sparked a debate about the role of communists in the development of that policy, their position in the face of the change of government, and their attitude towards the PS, the UCR, and the left-wing sectors of socialism that were beginning to coalesce in the Socialist Workers' Party (PSO), among whose members the CP gained some foothold. However, it came into conflict with the incipient Trotskyist groups that also sought to carve out a place for themselves in that organisation.

In this context, the CI made a harsh criticism of the local communists, centred on the need to strengthen "proletarianisation" and to confront the "opportunist deviations" which, in its view, had arisen after the Ninth Congress of the CP.[16] It ended with the displacement and replacement of its leadership, already weakened by the absence of its two main leaders: Rodolfo Ghioldi, imprisoned in Brazil after the failed insurrectionary attempt of 1935, and Victorio Codovilla, who was involved in the Civil War in Spain. That indication, however, did not entail a revision of the Popular front orientation, but of the practical ways of developing it. With the electoral

[14] La Internacional, 3/9/1936. Iñigo Carrera, 2000.

[15] Nuestra Revista, October-November, 1937.

[16] "The Report on the Situation in the Argentine Party. 7/4/1938", in Jeifets and Schelchkov, 2018.

route temporarily ruled out, the CI's instructions tended to make the CP rely on those social milieus in which it was strongest in order to deploy a *frentist* action. These encompassed the organised workers' movement and the communist place within the "anti-fascist" movement, including the "broad" organizations it had promoted in that period, such as women's , anti-racist, anti-repressive, groups of intellectuals and student organizations, which represented broader sectors than the communist militancy itself. The “workerism” to which the CI appealed did not refer to the search for a class politics, nor to reducing its activity among intellectuals, but to a way of transforming the minimal and democratic struggles of the working class into a resource from which to converge with the socialist and radical rank and file, putting pressure on their leaderships. At the same time, the criticism of the "social-democratic" deviation did not involve a call to develop a revolutionary policy or to radicalise the methods of action, but to strengthen party discipline in the face of the challenges to its Popular Front policy in the framework of a weakened leadership.[17] This was combined with a disproportionate criticism of Trotskyism, both because of the activity of incipient groups identified with the Fourth International—which complicated the fusion between the CP and the PSO—and because the figure of Trotsky was identified with a revolutionary critique of the Popular Front orientation. Thus, the open debate on the composition and practice of the party that was being built referred centrally to the multiple tactics on which to explore the concretion of the Popular Front in Argentina, and the need to sustain party cohesion to carry it forward, avoiding or cushioning internal and external criticism.

While the CP had initial difficulty in resolving the open crisis—as evidenced by the contradictory "official" accounts of its ending—by mid-1938 it began to adopt a new position on the political stage. The Munich Pact, while signifying a strong challenge to the expectation of halting Hitler's advance through an agreement with France and Britain, translated into the American sphere into a greater rapprochement of the Communists with American policy. The CP be-

[17] Piro Mittelman, 2021, a.

gan to converge with those sectors of the bourgeoisie and the "democratic" parties who saw in Roosevelt's pan-Americanism an alternative path to that proposed by Britain for Argentina.[18]. In this way, the ideas of "national unity" and "American unity" began to amalgamate with those of "anti-fascist unity" and with the Popular Front. After reaching an agreement with their leaderships, the CP managed to establish networks of action and practical links with militants and leaders of the "democratic parties", believing that they represented *de facto* the realisation of the Popular Front orientation.

This moment of reconfiguration was abruptly interrupted by the signing of the German-Soviet pact. This pact produced an abrupt turnaround in the CP's Popular Front policy, causing a major impact on the national political debate.[19] In a matter of hours and days, a wide range of political organizations and intellectual and cultural personalities expressed their views on the pact. Similarly, the CP itself quickly adapted its discourse to Moscow's new diplomatic orientation, although the difficulties varied among the different areas in which the party intervened. While its neutralist position was reflected from the first hours after the signing of the pact, its rejection of "imperialism" was uneven with regard to the United States, Great Britain and Germany, giving greater continuity to Pan-Americanism. At the same time, the characterization of the links between those powers and local political actors was inconsistent. The meaning of terms such as "oligarchy" or "reaction" became ambiguous during this period, since those who had been presented as "progressive" sectors of the bourgeoisie were firmly imbricated with the powers that were now being disavowed. [20]

Based on an analysis of the definitions, debates and political orientations deployed by the CP in this period, I have pointed out that the party's political line led to a profound modulation in the Popular Front orientation, but it did not produce a qualitative transformation of it. This is due, on the one hand, to the very explanation of

[18] Nuestra Revista, November 1938.

[19] Piro Mittelman, 2019.

[20] Orientación, 12/12/1940; Argentina Libre, 13/2/1941.

the shift, inasmuch as the Kremlin's motivation for establishing alliances with France, England and Germany was not motivated by ideological preferences among political regimes but rather by its strategic perspectives on the war, and its possible effects on the stability of the ruling group in the USSR. Hence, the local alliance with the "democracies" or with "fascism" had the same root, and its justification was not to be found in theoretical shifts but in the development of geopolitical tensions in Europe. On the other hand, despite the developed tensions with the Socialists and Radicals over their positions on the war, the CP never abandoned its Popular Front perspective in terms of projecting a "democratic alliance" that would establish a constitutional government headed by Radicalism.

In this sense, the period 1939-1941 can be defined as a period of strong contradictions, tensions and relative political isolation of the CP. While it was forced to flaunt its unconditional adherence to the neutralism advocated by Moscow, it made permanent attempts to establish ties with the "democratic forces", which in that period included, in its reading, President Roberto Ortiz himself. These efforts, however, collided with the grouping of various socialists, radicals and democrats in *Acción Argentina*—an organisation which openly rejected the German-Soviet pact and which made permanent displays of sympathy for Britain and the United States.[21] Similarly, in the labour movement, the CP had to strike a balance between its polemics over the war within the trade union leaderships and its efforts to sustain the organisational networks built up in the previous period.[22] In practical terms, this meant trying to establish a relative split between its political definitions and its concrete activity in certain areas of intervention, favoring the preservation of its established positions. This tension was pointed out by trotskyist and anarchist organizations which, in turn, saw in the signing of the German-Soviet pact the possibility of a crisis developing among the followers of communism. [23]

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[21] Orientación, 2/6/1940.

[22] Orientación, 11/9/1940.

[23] La Internacional, September 1939; Acción Libertaria, May 1940.

In fact, before these tensions deepened—and within two years of the signing of the pact—the CP abandoned this orientation to embark once again on an alliance with the "democratic powers". Thus, the neutralist period was buried in the official history of communism itself—removing all traces of its actions during that period—which retrospectively reveals the discomfort and strong tensions it experienced during those months. Only the invasion of the USSR and the prestige gained by the Soviet Union in its triumph against Nazism could muffle that memory. The almost exclusive interest was to set in motion all possible mechanisms to bring the national government into line with Soviet foreign policy and with the Allied side. This was centred on getting socialists and radicals to accept the inclusion of communism in the incipient Democratic Union of 1942, and to ensure that it included sectors of conservatism and representatives of Catholicism.

Within the framework of this effort, the communists dealt with the 1943 coup d'état by identifying its instigators in the context of the global conflict. These events led to changes in their understanding of the Popular Front policy. If it supposed a collaboration between the working class and "progressive" or "democratic" sectors of the bourgeoisie to confront fascism, who were those progressive sectors? Who embodied the fascist threat at any given moment? The "progressive" bourgeoisie went from being restricted to its political representatives (the UCR and the PDP) to being directly identified with the corporately organised ruling classes through the Rural Society or the Chamber of Commerce. What was at first explained as a tension between the "national" bourgeoisie and imperialism became diluted into a conglomerate that openly included the representatives of the British and American embassies. Simultaneously, the "enemy" to be fought was also subject to variations. If in 1935 the Justo regime and the *Concordancia* were the expression of "*criollo* fascism" (local fascism), by 1943 the CP did not rule out the possibility that the same General who had presided over the country since 1932 might represent the "democra-

tic forces". [24]

The CP shaped its view of the political regime inaugurated in June 1943 under the slogan of National Unity and following the post-war prospects of the Soviet bureaucracy.[25] The characterization of the regime as fascist meant that the central orientation of the party was to overthrow the government. Once the insurrectional route tried in 1944 had failed, and in line with its return to legality and the revival of opposition activity, the CP focused its energies on the development of the UD. Again, the UD was supposed to crystallise the vaunted confluence with the UCR and the PS that the party had been advocating since 1935. The March for the Constitution and Freedom was held in September 1945, in the face of a worn-out regime that saw a shift in international policy, and the support of important sectors of society for the UD—including the business chambers and the American embassy. This massive demonstration seemed to confirm the CP's perspective, until the events of 17th October broke out. Faced with these events, the CP entered a period of hesitation, marked by the intention of preserving its central political definitions while pondering the strength of the grasp that General Perón had achieved among the organised workers.[26]

Although after the elections—and in response to all the predictions of an electoral triumph for the UD—the CP strengthened its Popular Front policy through the electoral route, on the other hand, it began to question the effectiveness of this orientation in winning the support of the workers' movement. As long as this reflection was limited by unconditional adherence to Moscow's directives, the CP plunged into a period of oscillations, confusion and internal tensions regarding its conceptualization of political reality.

During this period, sectors of the bourgeoisie—not only its parties, but also its business chambers and the American embassy—took a stand in opposition to Perón's government, which was beginning to win the support of important sections of the working class.

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[24] Orientación, 19/11/1942; Orientación, 7/8/1941; Orientación, 10/2/1943.

[25] Piro Mittelman, 2021, b.

[26] Orientación, 17/10/1945; Orientación, 24/10/1945.

In this context, the CP's determination to maintain its Popular Front orientation necessarily implied taking sides in this dispute. The workers' support for Perón after 17th October did not push the CP to demand greater autonomy for the workers' movement, but to the prospect of the workers joining the multi-class front proposed by the CP and headed by the UCR. An different option distant from both alternatives was not contemplated. Defining the aims of the revolution in Argentina as "bourgeois democratic" necessarily implied taking a position between two camps: the "progressives" and the "reactionaries", with an oscillating class distinction between the two throughout the period. Its characterizations of the critical moments of October 1945 were the consequence of conceptions rooted in his theory and *praxis* since—and even before—1935. Its Popular Front policy, which had not limited its strong insertion into the workers' movement during the previous decade, had not been transformed, but rather expressed the tensions derived from the changes in the national and international political situation and the new class alignments that emerged at that juncture. In 1946 the CP carried out another of the zigzags that characterized its policy at this stage, attempting a new dialogue with the Peronist workers and making a relative self-criticism of its time in the UD, but the scenario had already changed substantially.[27] Its forces in the workers' movement had diminished and its "political representation" among the workers had become a minority.

All these modulations of Popular Front policies to which we have referred so far became more complex in each of the social milieus in which it intervened. The application of a Popular Front policy not only had to challenge the specific dynamics of each setting, but also had to insert itself into traditions that had their own chronology, impacting on the definitions of the Popular Front conception. The prospect of reincorporating the communist unions into the CGT by diluting the old CUSC (Comité de Unidad Sindical Clasista), which took place in 1935, meant that the CP had to be attentive to the tensions and power disputes between the leaders of the *cegetistas*

[27] 11 Congreso, 28/6/1946.

(members of the CGT) linked to the PS and *trade unionism*. At the same time, it expressed a constant tension between the economic and political demands—the latter associated with the "democratic" aspects of the Popular Front—which did not always recognise the same scheme of allies, adversaries and enemies. A similar phenomenon happened in the women's and student's movements, when the communists tried to combine a structural and organic insertion with a superstructural alignment linked to their political campaigns. In both cases the CP had to reinsert itself in far-reaching traditions, such as liberal feminism and universitarian reformism, weaving personal and political networks with actors who until then had been absent from its radar of action—or had been directly contested in the previous stage. This led to a diverse scenario that did not always coincide with the political periodisation. Furthermore, its relations with the intellectual and cultural world were even less static. Although the CP sought to ensure that its work in these spheres would collaborate with its fraternal objectives, it had to negotiate, exchange and adopt many approaches that were alien to its own tradition, from its readings of the national past to its assimilation of mass culture.

Thus, the modulations in Popular Front policies not only represent a chronological indication or a precise periodisation, but also evidence of the political roots that this orientation had achieved in the local milieu. Far from being attributable to a lack of understanding or a rigid view of the national reality, the CP tried out different—sometimes controversial—explanations to fit its policy into a given context. These depended not only on its own actions but also on its interaction with the environment in which it intervened. Just as its history cannot be understood without its participation in the Democratic Union of 1945, the formation of that coalition can hardly omit the influence of the debates which, for a decade, intertwined socialists, radicals, democrats and communists, and which ended up giving a common language to that opposition group. That is why we have excluded the concept of a CP external to the Argentine reality as an explanation for its course. On the contrary, we have emphasized the gravity and relevance of its orientations in the local politics of those years, or at least in an important part of it.

From change of orientation to change of physiognomy

As we have pointed out, the popular-front policy aligned the CP around the disputes between the various dominant groups in the country, marked by the tensions arising from the struggle between Britain and the United States for hegemony in the region. I would like to explore this point further, as I believe this shift in focus towards forming an opposition coalition that could potentially lead the state has had profound consequences for the party's identity.

The new characterizations deployed by the CP under the Popular Front prism made its interpretation of national political trends more complex. The contestation of the political arc as a whole during the Class Against Class stage gave way to a more surgical exploration of the possible alignments that could be established according to the new orientation. Instead, the modulations of this policy opened up a range of interactions with its intended allies. Radicalism was becoming the political force capable of achieving the formation of a new democratic government, which meant that many of the CP slogans, gestures and speeches were aimed at converging with that party. Over the years, the communists gradually sharpened their analysis of the UCR[28] , studying its internal tendencies, the conflicts in its National Committee and acting in accordance with their relations with the provincial strongmen. Their approaches to Amadeo Sabattini—governor of Cordoba who was not aligned with the Alvearist leadership—for example, were a way of putting pressure on the majority leadership of Alvear, which was more reluctant to form an alliance with the communists.[29] In the case of socialism, the counterpoint of agreements and disagreements came about because the PS represented not only a potential ally, but also a rival to be overcome in various areas of intervention, particularly in the labour movement and the CGT.[30] These contacts, in turn, allowed the CP to make more accurate readings of the political dynamics in the national parlia-

[28] Sommi, 1940.

[29] Orientación, 15/2/1940.

[30] Ceruso, 2023.

ment, triggering communication and networking mechanisms that enabled it to join opposition activities until 1943 and to resume them in 1945.

These links with the UCR and the PS—but also with the PDP and conservatism—led to alignments with the various tendencies of the ruling classes. Far from denying that link, the CP included it in the basis of popular-frontism, which postulated the "progressive" or "democratic" character of a fraction of the bourgeoisie. The criterion for determining this was twofold. On the one hand, an economic point of view was used, assuming the progressiveness of those sectors determined to put an end to the backwardness of the national economy expressed in the latifundium and large landowners -a characterization which preceded the Popular Front period and dated back to 1928. Although at first the CP made some (unsuccessful) efforts to find a "national bourgeoisie" willing to undertake such a task, eventually it came to consider that "national development" would be directly linked to Argentina's alignment with American Pan-Americanism and, afterward, with the "concert of nations" that the USSR was predicting for the post-war period.[31] Within this conceptualization, foreign investment in industry—necessary to overcome backwardness—would be a by-product of political alignment with the "democratic powers". Soon, the second criterion by which the CP judged the progressiveness of the dominant sectors became more important: the political one. Companies began to be dissected into those that were "democratic" and those that were "fascist".[32] And although these epithets were changeable pending on contingent tensions and conflicts, by 1945 communists were identifying as progressive all tendencies within the ruling classes—including the main business chambers—which opposed the "fascism" of the government born in June 1943.

This is not to point out the paradoxes of communist policy, but to understand the magnitude and implications of it. This new interpretative scheme shifted the balance of communist activity. During this

[31] Orientación, 28/8/1941; Orientación, 22/8/1945.

[32] Real, 1962.

period, the CP persisted in its effort to establish itself in various social milieus, increasing its presence in the organized labor movement as never before. However, at the same time the CP conceived that this organically structured militant force would only achieve a political expression that would transform social reality to the extent that a "democratic" government led by radicalism could be established. Having ruled out an armed or insurrectional struggle to that end—with the exception the formation of Patria Libre in 1944 as a political-military organ which attempted an unsuccessful insurrection[33]—the "democratic" government would have to emerge from the full exercise of suffrage, protected by the National Constitution. Hence the aspiration of the communists in their militant milieus was to contribute to that goal by putting their "firepower" at the disposal of that fight.

One example is to be found in the intellectual world, where despite its expansion of networks and relations among intellectuals, the CP was intransigent when it came to demanding electoral support for radicalism from members of the Association of Intellectuals, Artists, Journalists and Writers. It even expelled two of its "fellow travelers" who had been members of that organization, such as César Tiempo and Samuel Eichelbaum.[34] Similarly, around 1942 his actions within the CGT aimed at the joint construction of a Democratic Union capable of ousting President Ramón Castillo from the government. For their part, the student and women movements organised around communist initiatives played a key role in driving the 1945/46 election campaign. [35]

All these elements precipitated what we consider to be profound changes in the physiognomy of the CP as a political artifact. Not without contradictions, tensions and even internal crises, the CP gradually transformed itself into an organisation with growing pretensions of integrating itself into the political regime, even at the cost of abandoning all revolutionary rhetoric or confrontation with

[33] El Himno Nacional, February 1944; El Himno Nacional, March 1944.

[34] Unidad, August 1937; Unidad, August 1937; Claridad, October 1937.

[35] El Patriota, 7/4/1945; Orientación, 7/11/1945; Falucho, 26/12/1945.

the social order. Its efforts to connect with workers, students, intellectuals, women and various spheres of culture and sport were not to result in the formation of an autonomous social force antagonistic to the capitalist state. The perspective of a "democratic" management of the state implied first of all distancing itself from the image of a small incendiary group. Instead, the CP aimed to become a mass party, capable of operating in the national reality while respecting the rules, traditions, uses and customs of the political system. [36]

This aim was expressed in the CP's efforts to demonstrate to its supposed allies that its turn to the Front was not just another episode in its strategic ups and downs and that its democratic rhetoric did not serve as a Trojan Horse for the precepts of the Third Period. Over time, this tendency was consolidated in a programme aimed at implementing government policies—either from parliament or from the executive branch. This programme was combined with a demand for a return to "constitutional normality" in the face of the instability of Roberto Ortiz's government between 1940 and 1941, and more importantly between 1943 and 1946. Its inscription in liberal culture and the rereading of the national past through that canonical prism contributed to the construction of a narrative that positioned the party as the heir to the country's 'democratic and progressive' traditions, from the May Revolution to the Sáenz Peña Law, through the Generation of 1837 and the rest of the liberal historiographical canon.

When it obtained its legal status in 1945, the party believed that the international dynamic would inexorably place it in some part of the new government that would come to power after the 1946 elections. Thus, the CP placed all its hopes in that gamble, while it started to suspect that the identity of the workers' movement had started to shift. To achieve this goal—and despite the illegality that hung over their shoulders for almost the entire period—the Communists were prepared to distance themselves from the more radicalized and militant tendencies of the workers' movement, present in the construction workers' strike and the subsequent general strike of January

[36] La Internacional, 3/9/1936.

1936. The CP not only joined the broader process of institutionalisation of the workers' movement that took place at that stage, but also actively contributed to it. It gave its trade union organizations characteristics that coincided with the growing intervention of the state in the world of work. The persistence of a certain combative exercise was combined with a growing reformism that subjected confrontational actions to an evaluation of their relevance for sustaining the alleged links with the state, employers' sectors and "public opinion" in general. [37]

Simultaneously, this tendency to moderate the most combative interventions was reflected in the escalation of debates with those left-wing organizations that were opposed to the Popular Front orientation, particularly Trotskyism and certain anarchist groups. Despite the fact that these were incipient or not very influential organizations, the CP unleashed ruthless verbal and even physical violence on those it considered "inciters of chaos".[38] This disproportion can be explained both by the adoption of increasingly repressive guidelines sent from the Kremlin (whose most obvious correlate was the so-called "Moscow Trials"), and by the CP's own disciplining process, whose few dissident voices in the period were associated with the international struggle against "Trotskyism" or with a lack of loyalty to the ruling group in the USSR.

This change of physiognomy was linked to the dissolution of the CP's class identity in favor of a broader reference to the popular masses, the people and even the citizens. In order to convince radicals and socialists that the communists should be a fundamental element of the Popular Front, they presented themselves as the "popular component" of a democratic coalition. Their strong presence in the workers' movement was no longer a matter of class confrontation, but rather of the material and moral boost it would give to a “democratic” coalition to have proletarian support. Hence the confidence that the presence of communists and socialists in the 1946 Democratic Union would give it the support of the organised labour

[37] Orientación, 26/11/42; El Obrero de la Construcción, 1/2/1941.

[38] Orientación, 15/9/1938.

movement. This shift toward democratic-based politics was equally evident in the women's and students' organizations. In both cases, their demands, debates and actions were increasingly detached from the class reference. Female workers enrolled in the Junta de la Victoria or the Unión Argentina de Mujeres were able to coexist with the aristocratic ladies because their shared programme was not aimed at social struggle but at organizing "democratic women". As for the students, they were considered as components of a democratic conglomerate, but not as allies of the workers' movement in its struggles. Finally, this mutation was expressed in the position of the party on the advance of mass culture. The recreation of a workers' culture gave way to a set of practices that combined, with contradictions, the workers' identity with a diffuse appeal to "the popular" and the appropriation of mass cultural consumption, such as cinema, theatre, radio or football. [39]

It should be noted that the CP—despite everything—remained an essentially proletarian party. The extension of its networks into other spheres did not obscure its preponderant presence in the world of labor. Hence this "skin shedding" gave rise to permanent tensions and crises, starting with the serious difficulties in defining the role to be played by the workers' movement in the coalition. The idea of establishing alliances with "democratic" industries did not prevent it from opposing the English transport monopolies. Similarly, its appeal to women as citizens was not an obstacle to its participation in the demands of women workers. At the political level, this crossroads translated into the delicate balance between so-called "economic demands" and "democratic demands". The highest level of conflict was reflected in the hesitations and confusions during the 1945 election campaign, when communist support for the "living forces of the nation" clashed with majority sections of the working class who saw in them their executioners. This unresolved dichotomy constituted, in the end, the Gordian knot of the Popular Front policies: the attempt to preserve the proletarian identity and composition permanently collided with a practice centered on class concilia-

[39] Piro Mittelman, 2023.

tion.

This axis of conflict is linked to the flimsy foundations on which the opening up and broadening of the CP's radius of action at this stage rested. As I have said, the historiography on communism—or that tangentially referred to this stage of communist development—tended to make fragmentary evaluations of the politics of the front. While some studies have stressed that it coincided with an abandonment of its more sectarian features in favor of an opening of its frontiers towards new actors and institutional spheres, other works have stressed that by 1945 it had led to joint actions with some of the declared enemies of the proletariat. Within this conceptualization, this latter movement—mimicked in its reactive response to the origins of Peronism—is assumed to be the historical mistake of vernacular communism, resulting in its loss of influence among the workers, and followed by a course that led it to become a secondary actor on the local political scene. However, looking at the dynamics as a whole, we conclude that these two approaches present a poorly integrated picture, to the point of not associating the strength previously gained with the abrupt decline.

In this sense—without ignoring the strong influence of state action, and its capacity to discipline and institutionalise the workers' movement—we consider that the strength that the CP displayed in the second half of the 1930s must be relativised. Its influence in the workers' movement, among women, in the student movement and among intellectuals was extremely weak, particularly considering that in all of them a gap opened up between the party's political influence and its organic action. When we shift the focus from the declarations against fascism by the CGT, the communist trade unions, the FUA or the women's organizations to the daily practice of the CP in those social milieus, we find a rift that is difficult to overcome. This gap was often expressed in a disconnection between the "democratic" demands, which the communists confined to the political superstructure, and the "economic" or "minimal" demands, which generally governed the daily life of those organizations. While the former were generally confined to the debates between the most active sectors—often the communist militants themselves—to the leading bodies, or to theoretical and ideological polemics, the

latter responded to the motivations of the "grassroots" militants in the trade unions, of women who only collaborated extensively with the relief work, or of students who sought to resolve their academic affairs. Thus, that influence depended less on a political or strategic adherence to the ideas of communism (already highly fluctuating) than on the ability of its cadres and militants to be effective defenders of the daily needs of their comrades in the workplace or other spheres. Once that possibility was restricted—either by state action or by their own mistakes—it was not difficult for that influence to transmute into new political identities.

Was this rift the result of a specific sociological configuration, or was it the product of the political shift that began in 1935? Undoubtedly, this split extended beyond the communist sphere, affecting other political and trade union organizations. Thus, this question gave rise to debates both in the trade union sphere (for example, the question of trade union independence[40]), in the world of university reformism, and on the left in general. However, we have found elements to affirm that this tendency was reinforced by the policy of the Popular Front. This policy—by claiming that a democratic government taking control of the state would bring about an evolutionary capitalist development—placed the institutions of civil society as foundations for this project. Trade unions, student organizations and all the spheres that were still relatively autonomous from the state would come together for this common purpose. Hence, as long as the demand for a return to "constitutional normality" prevailed, their political action was considered exceptional. However, once this goal was achieved, the regular functioning of those institutions would sustain the evolutionary development of capitalism. The CP organised and recreated the institutional activity of those spaces. By doing so, it was able to influence them in such a way that they became functional cogs in the aspired governing coalition, just as the CI had tried to do in other countries where Popular Front policies were put into practice.

In this sense, the central consequence of this dynamic was the

[40] Camarero, 2015.

absence of an autonomous project from those outlined by the dominant groups. The subordination of a large part of its activity to the creation of an alliance headed by radicalism implied a permanent adaptation and correction of its tactical lines in order to converge with that perspective. Actions independent of both the state and the rest of the dominant sectors in conflict were never an alternative at this stage. In this way—and returning to what was said earlier—we can affirm that part of the influence won by the CP in those years had its Achilles heel in the fact that its fate depended—to a certain extent—less on its own action than on the outcome of that dispute in the spheres of power.

Returning to the initial historiographical approach, I believe that in this article I have offered a view that links the party's "successes" during the Popular Front period with its subsequent decline. Regardless of the difficulties, mistakes and inaccuracies that the CP may have had in its reading of events, the support for the Democratic Union in 1946 was not the result of a lack of understanding of the local reality, but the consequence of an orientation that it had deployed in the previous ten years. The same policy that it implemented while co-conducting the CGT was the one that distanced it from the workers once a significant part of the labour movement turned to another of the dominant projects. Its strength in the field of "anti-fascism" during the 1930s was diluted once the explanatory capacity of the fascism/democracy dichotomy lost its force in the face of changes in national and international politics. In turn, its specific influence in shaping a collective imagination of class reconciliation within the labour movement, among students, women, and in the world of culture—which contained more radical tendencies—was a factor that helped state action find fertile ground for its expansion, translated into a political project since 1943.

This observation allows to take distance from a teleological interpretation of that trajectory, as we rule out the possibility that the success of Peronism was inscribed in the reality of 1935. To say that the Popular Front policy was a determining factor in understanding the CP's moment of decline does not imply that it could not have achieved eventual success. A triumph of the Democratic Union in

1946 could have placed it within a governing coalition, as happened in other countries where communism was part of the state. But even so, the preceding contradictions would not have been avoided, especially given the turnaround in the international situation after the end of the Second World War. Since this counterfactual exercise is beyond the scope of the present research, I can limit ourselves to pointing out that after that experience the CP never managed to regain the prominence it had in those years.

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