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## Semán, Ernesto. *Ambassadors of the Working Class: Argentina's International Labor Activists & Cold War Democracy in the Americas*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017.

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**Semán, Ernesto. *Ambassadors of the Working Class: Argentina's International Labor Activists & Cold War Democracy in the Americas*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017.**

Juan Perón's lasting imprint on Argentinian politics makes Ernesto Semán's new book, *Ambassadors of the Working Class: Argentina's International Labor Activists & Cold War Democracy in the Americas*, less a historical read and more a lens through which to probe the durability of Peronism. Semán provides a remarkably fresh and well-researched look at Peronism and Cold War rivalry in the Western Hemisphere by uncovering details about an obscure worker attaché program implemented by Perón shortly after his election.

Perón was elected president of Argentina in June of 1946, and within one month, he had launched a worker attaché program that took rank-and-file workers from factories and workplaces across Argentina, hastily trained them, and launched them into the Foreign Service. Over time, they became increasingly better trained and integrated into the state bureaucracy. They were tasked with exporting Peronism, called the Third Position, which was predicated on social rights and nationalism and was presented as an alternative to both communism and capitalism. The attachés were also charged with cultivating a regional leadership role for Argentina, which was explicitly anti-American, while also commandeering the role of protector of the New Deal. In all, over five hundred blue-collar workers would take their place among Argentinian elites and shape history from 1946 until 1955, when Perón was overthrown. The rise of the working classes into the foreign service rattled the elites, eliciting openly hostile reactions both in the press and by other diplomats, some of whom openly obstructed the work of the attachés.

Semán argues that the worker attaché program provides a view into Peronism that disputes the strict "linear evolution toward an increasingly reactionary stance" that is most widely attributed to Perón and uses the attaché program to demonstrate that Peronism was chock full of contradictions and complications (p. 184). Semán's evidence clearly supports and fleshes out this thesis. One particular example demonstrates the complicated nature of the attaché program. As Semán explains, the attachés were hard to reign in once dispatched, stating, "The attachés downplayed Perón's instructions and developed strategies that were different from, or plainly against, Perón's foreign policy, yet they always acted in the name of Perón, without questioning his authority" (p. 10). Also problematic was that as Perón shifted right, his attachés were not quick to follow, thus providing more evidence as to why Perón remains difficult to categorize.

The richness of the book is found in Semán's diligent research, which unearthed many of the attachés' personal stories and the challenges they faced in their posts and thus their varied degrees of success. Perón won over vast numbers of workers and labor activists including communists, anarchists, and socialists despite his other supporters coming from the Catholic right, the military, and nationalist groups. The worker attachés were a varied group, and their stories provide a real glimpse into Perón's diverse base. Studies of Peronism often focus on links with fascism, but Semán refocuses the lens on a cadre of leftists who preached economic justice and political participation, supporting Semán's assertion that Perón was a walking contradiction. For example, one young attaché with strong communist leanings was dispatched to Stalinist Moscow only to confront brutal conditions, shortages of food, and ultimately disillusionment with the communist project, culminating in his effort to smuggle another disillusioned communist out of the country in his suitcase. In another example, a former meatpacking worker turned attaché was dispatched to Havana and was influential in convening anti-imperialist labor and social movements throughout Cuba. In Guatemala, one attaché provided sanctuary to those

loyal to Jacobo Arbenz after he was ousted, despite Perón privately supporting the U.S.-led coup. While still another young attaché was dispatched to Colombia, where he found a receptive climate and managed to get ample air time on local radio stations, a warm welcome at worker rallies, and numerous press interviews—not only building a following for Peronism in Colombia, but also diving into local disputes. As Semán states, “[He] sought (and to some extent achieved) the power to contribute to internal disputes that changed the lives of millions of Colombians, affecting their working conditions, cultural options, land ownership, safety, and income” (p. 150). Granted, Semán also credits U.S. labor diplomat Serafino Romualdi, sent to Colombia as the American Federation of Labor (AFL) representative, with doing the same despite working in opposition to the Argentinian attaché – ultimately painting a rich portrait of Cold War dynamics in Latin America. This fight for influence waged by the U.S. and Argentina in the early post-war years comes to life in the book, which provides not only an in-depth look into Perón’s presidency and the worker attaché program but also a close look at the region during the Cold War and at the U.S. and Argentinian players jockeying for regional leadership. The book also documents the outsized influence rank-and-file workers had in this regional confrontation alongside U.S. officials and other elite players. For example, Semán profiles the way in which the worker attaché program funded a trip across Latin America to build support for an alliance of progressive groups opposed to U.S. imperialism in the region. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara were among those participating in the trip – at a time when both men were searching for approaches to change and had not yet settled on communism. In other words, the work of the attachés brings into light the fluidity of the period, as well as the power Argentinian workers were given to chart new paths, despite the capriciousness of historical contingency.

Semán’s skills lie in his ability to gather copious amounts of details to support his thesis. The book is a good model of scholarship that sheds light on broader historical trends through the fastidious researching of one empirical example. In addition to Argentinian scholars, this book would be attractive to labor historians, scholars of Latin America, populism, social movements, and the Cold War era in general. The strengths of the book reside in its ability to highlight key issues that are underplayed by other scholars.

The book suffers from a bit of repetition, especially in the first few chapters. Reading it requires that one look for themes that are often buried in mountains of detail. This is both a strength and a weakness in that it attests to the significant amount of time expended to gather evidence to support Semán’s thesis. Semán is not shy in asserting that quite simply, the worker attachés fundamentally altered history. But the evidence to support his boldest claims is thin. For example, Semán argues that the 2005 rejection of the Free Trade Area of the Americas can be traced back to the work of the attachés. This is a jump, and his research does not necessarily lend credence to it. On the other hand, he does compile enough data to support his assertion that “in the analysis of the life and actions of the worker attachés we have seen labor activism’s central place in turning populist politics into a strong (albeit problematic) democratic tradition in the Americas” (p. 231). Furthermore, the book clearly paints a portrait of Perón and Peronism that defies categorization – for it is neither fascist nor stereotypically populist, nor is it a classic right-based approach to social equity. It is Peronism. And the worker attaché program further confirms the complexity that defines Peronism – then and now.

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