

## The social life of politics: ethics, kinship, and union activism in Argentina

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The social life of politics: ethics, kinship, and union activism in Argentina**, by Sian Lazar, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2017, xi + 243 pp., \$90.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781503601574, \$27.95, ISBN 9781503602410 index

In 2015, when Argentina's presidential frontrunner, Peronist candidate Daniel Scioli, was narrowly defeated in a runoff election by his right-wing opponent, pro-government Argentinians took to the streets to protest. At the forefront were labor unions, which mobilized thousands before the election and subsequently led the Peronist resistance to Mauricio Macri's neoliberalism. Sian Lazar argues that the enduring strength and political leadership of Argentina's labor movement, in the face of immense challenges, is rooted in unions' specific organizational practices that facilitate deeply personal political subjectivation processes for activists.

*The Social Life of Politics* is a comparative study of two public sector unions. Representing white-collar state workers, Unión del Personal Civil de la Nación (UPCN) is avowedly Peronist and bureaucratic, while La Asociación Trabajadores del Estado (ATE) is politically autonomous, with a democratic, horizontal organizational structure and a majority blue-collar membership. While noting the contrast, Lazar is not arguing in favor of either approach. Rather, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2009 and 2012, Lazar elucidates UPCN and ATE's shared capacity to transform their members into political actors through processes locally referred to as 'militancia' and 'contención.'

Lazar spends a great deal of the book untangling these multivalent terms, which are rooted in Argentina's social movement history and remain ubiquitous in political discourse. Union activists (including delegates and members) use 'militancia' to characterize their political identities, constituted by specific values and dispositions, as well as an unyielding commitment to collective action. Lazar concentrates on a different use of the term: militancia as political journey and 'practices of self-cultivation' (a politicization, of sorts). While interlocutors are adamant that militancia 'se nace no se hace' (is born, not made), Lazar argues that unions play a significant role in its cultivation.


UPCN and ATE unionists use the term contención to describe the collective side of political subjecthood. Translated as 'containment' or 'encompassment,' contención refers to processes that cultivate and call forth values, such as vocation, love, and passion among union members. It also refers to the act of bringing individuals into the collective fold – both indoctrination *and* incorporation. Often, this occurs through quasi-therapeutic dynamics between union delegates and members (a practice derived from Kleinian psychoanalysis). UPCN's leaders, for instance, use a 'containment as care' model, supporting members through counseling, negotiation, brokerage, and social interaction (p.168). ATE's approach to contención is more communal, providing spaces and opportunities for political encompassment to take place, including assemblies and street protest. Though their pedagogical methods differ, both unions achieve contención through education.

Addressing members' grievances, engaging in protest, and providing political education are hardly unique to Argentina's unions, so why do these practices so effectively construct political identities? What is remarkable about either of these union models? Lazar suggests that something deeper occurs in these routine practices through which labor activists construct themselves as political subjects. Building on a Foucauldian anthropology of ethics,

Lazar characterizes the processes of subjectivation as an *ethical* subjecthood that merges political struggle with all other aspects of activists' lives. Uncovering the intimate features of union activism, Lazar suggests that *militancia* and *contención* are carried out through emotional connection and kinship structures, which craft and circulate values, ethical dispositions, and strengthen groups. 'Kinning,' as she calls it, happens through many projects and in numerous settings – 'in the street protest, the ritual act, around the coffee table... and in the classroom' (p.15). 'Kin,' in this context, is both figurative and literal. Not only is *militancia* passed on intergenerationally and many Argentinians obtain union jobs through familial connections, UPCN and ATE also construct themselves as organizations using family as a metaphor. Moreover, both unions intentionally incorporate members' actual families in union activities to reinforce emotional connection and commitment.

*The Social Life of Politics* pushes us to think beyond the 'dichotomy of rational choice versus ideological manipulation' in political struggle, arguing that the construction of collective political identities and the personal connections between union activists convincingly explain the strength of Argentina's labor movement (p.197). In so doing, Lazar engages several key conversations in social movement studies, building on social network approaches, the expansive literature on identity and meaning-making, and the contemporary debate on emotions in political activism.

Yet the book is also weakened by a somewhat circuitous discussion of its core concepts. Lazar cannot take sole blame for the conceptual opacity of *militancia* and *contención*, terms taken directly from her subjects; the precise meaning of culturally specific notions is often lost in translation. Nonetheless, as a reader, I craved a more precise theoretical apparatus. More work may still be needed to make sense of the strength and tenacity of Argentina's labor movement and Argentinian activists' commitment to class struggle

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