The Fragility of the Moment: Politics and Class in the Aftermath of the 1944 Argentine Earthquake

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In less than a minute on a summer evening in 1944, an earthquake reduced the city of San Juan to rubble, leaving ten thousand dead and half the province homeless. The worst natural disaster in Argentine history, the tragedy was an indictment of the old political order and a spur for the new order to come.[1] Here the recently-installed military regime had its first chance to deliver on promises of social justice, as the little-known secretary of labor, Colonel Juan Domingo Perón, directed a massive relief campaign and commissioned ambitious plans for rebuilding. The social project to build a new citizenship was launched together with the spatial project to build a new city.

Within a few years, the broad success of Perón's social project would create the most powerful labor movement in Latin America. Perón himself, and the party he founded, would come to dominate the Argentine political stage for decades afterward. Yet the spatial project for transforming San Juan would stall and then break apart, as rebuilding turned from a symbol of national renewal into a messy provincial worry. The disaster and relief campaign became a foundational myth for Peronism—an "earthquake that shook history," for a recent biographer, because it was through the relief campaign that Perón met Evita—even as the failure of reconstruction was consigned to political (and scholarly) oblivion.[2]

Disasters such as this one are crucial moments for revealing and also for transforming political and social relationships. Insurrections by a "nature" that had seemed subdued, they unsettle, disrupt, and potentially overthrow apparently natural structures of social power. Because the existing arrangements of power are so often justified as "natural," the unexpected reshaping of the "natural" can call many of those arrangements into question. Such theaters of "outrage and blame" test the authority of states and technical elites: they can serve to challenge or undo that authority, but also to justify or reaffirm it.[3]

But the apparent naturalness of disasters can also allow them to be later ignored, written off as arbitrary matters beyond human control. Thus are disasters re-naturalized, rendering invisible the lives they destroyed, the structures of power and vulnerability they revealed, and the struggles to secure justice and position they sparked. It is precisely the intensity of the struggles they produce that leads disasters to be forgotten as those struggles are resolved or displaced. By reducing these broad societal conflicts to minor anecdotes, scholars have played a key role in this process of re-naturalization, in failing to grasp the importance of disasters.

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Returning to the San Juan earthquake, this essay will explore the local histories it made visible and set in motion to offer an explanation for the surprising silence on reconstruction. The emphasis here will not be on the lived experience of disaster and aftermath, although that is important, but rather on the broader way the disaster figured in local and national politics.

Solidarity and the Promise of Transformation

Founded on a riverbank at the foot of the Andes, San Juan in 1944 was the capital of an arid province whose prosperity came from wine production. Narrow and dusty streets full of modern cars spread outward from the colonial plaza that was still the center of power. From the respectable city "inside the four avenues," the winery elite and urban middle class ruled over the impoverished suburbs and flourishing vineyards outside—a landscape of "rooted vines and uprooted men," in the words of one social critic.[4] The provincial elite included many medical doctors, but the province had one of the worst levels of infant mortality in the county. Three-quarters of San Juan's young men were annually rejected as medically unfit for the draft. The winery elite was divided, and their rule had been neither stable nor unchallenged. Three times the Cantoni brothers, leaders of a local populist movement, had won the governorship, only to be driven from office by force each time. Within "the four avenues," the powerful enjoyed a fragile prosperity secured by exclusion and violence. Behind their elaborate façades, the city's mansions were made of adobe.

The massive earthquake on January 15, 1944 leveled center and periphery alike. Every symbol of civic authority was shattered: the offices of the provincial government, the legislature, the courts, the new city hall. All but one of the city's churches collapsed. Downtown cafes fell on Saturday evening crowds. Outside the center factories and shacks gave way, leaving behind a landscape of shattered adobe and half-buried bodies.[5] Nearly half of the province's two hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants were left homeless.

The collapse was widely viewed as an indictment of the previous order: popular rumors within the devastated city told of fleeing doctors and callous landlords, while military officials and the national press denounced the fraudulent rule and social blindness of corrupt elites. Technical reports stressed how this natural disaster was due to social causes, above all local construction methods in adobe. A major earthquake had struck San Juan fifty years before, and hundreds of tremors came each year, but there had been no building code and no provisions for seismic protection.

On taking office weeks earlier, Perón had announced that "we are going to pay off our great debt to the suffering and virtuous masses: the era of Argentine social policy has begun."[6] Far sooner than he had expected, the "social catalyst" of the earthquake offered a chance to make good on these claims.[7] Military troops and medical relief were dispatched immediately. On January 16 Perón went on national radio to launch a collection for victims.

Masterfully orchestrated in the media, the aid collection was an immediate

and resounding success, marking the public launching of Perón's career. Military officers took up a role previously fulfilled by private philanthropy, and contributions poured in from across the republic and the continent. Published lists included thousands of individuals' names and everything from major manufacturing interests and the Argentine Theosophical Society to prison inmates and shoeshiners. As Perón proclaimed, the collection was a "measure of solidarity," and San Juan was the first and most concrete beneficiary of the dictatorship's brand of social justice.[8]

Perón's superiors saw the earthquake as a means for denouncing and uprooting liberalism once and for all. After visiting San Juan, the head of the regime, General Ramírez, declared that the city was a blank slate. The disaster had demonstrated that "despite the years of venal and corrupting electoral politics" the people were strong and now "united, completely united, without political divisions, with their *caudillos* (local strongmen) forgotten and their faith placed in God, the Fatherland, and the national government."[9]

While others asserted political unity, Perón used the tragedy to produce it through a mobilizing and participatory aid campaign. The swift provision of medical service, food, assistance, and shelter seemed to demonstrate military competence in building a more just society. Perón made himself a hero and strengthened his position within the regime: the San Juan relief campaign even served as a cover as he organized the coup-within-a-coup that removed Ramírez from the presidency a month later. The wave of enthusiasm and possibility reflected in the aid collection gave force to Perón's political project. This was widely seen as a defining moment, a new social compact—comparable to the writing of the national constitution, an opposition newspaper later claimed.[10]

"On a social plane," Perón later argued, "most Argentines are comparable to the homeless" of San Juan; the right to shelter for them was the beginning of a broader set of social rights for all Argentines.[11]

The city was to become a model for Argentina as a nation, evidence of the technical capacity and social vision of the military regime. Within a week, a team of architects recruited by Perón had proposed a radical break: the city in ruins should be abandoned. San Juan should be rebuilt in a new form on a new site, on more solid ground to the southwest.

Both relief and rebuilding were portrayed as gifts. As with the new labor and social rights introduced a little later, the government claimed to be redeeming the "great debt to the suffering and virtuous masses." This authoritarian paternalism had unexpected radical effects, as government initiatives opened up space for a dramatic mobilization by newly-unionized workers that surprised nearly everyone, including Perón, and dramatically shifted the terrain of rights, class, and politics in Argentina for decades. The course of this process in Buenos Aires and more central areas is well-known, and the enduring strength of working-class Peronism has been a central obsessive theme in Argentine political and labor history ever since.[12] Yet considering the centrality of the San Juan earthquake to Perón's rise to power, the weakness of working-class Peronism there is striking.

Fractures and Standstills

Nearly every disaster produces moments of striking solidarity, a "disaster utopia" of unity forged out of shared suffering and effort.[13] On the night of the quake there were many acts of local heroism and kindness; in the grim days afterwards there was a massive and much-appreciated relief effort led by national troops and outside doctors.

But as Kai Erickson noted in his pioneering work, the experience of disaster can destroy community rather than renew it. The provision of relief by outsiders can undermine the recovery it is intended to produce.[14] As the gratitude of the moment faded, the disaster revealed and produced widening fissures within San Juan.

Within a day of the tragedy, the military authorities decided to quickly cremate the bodies of all the dead, apparently because they feared infection. On the edge of the vast common grave—or sometimes just on street corners—soldiers and volunteers doused piles of bodies with kerosene and set them aflame. In the rush, few previsions were made for identifying or keeping track of the dead: nothing resembling a list of victims would ever be compiled. Such actions of profound symbolic violence only compounded the horror and powerlessness of the aftermath of mass death.

The trainloads of aid dispatched by Perón were crucial, but they were not enough. On arrival, the military authorities banned sales of food and crucial supplies and confiscated existing stocks.[15] Even so, authorities lacked the means to provide food and shelter for all of the nearly hundred thousand homeless. Therefore they decided to evacuate as many as possible by train. This chaotic withdrawal split families and communities apart, as over a thousand children orphaned by the disaster were sent to institutions and tens of thousands of survivors were scattered across the country.

Waiting for evacuation, the invisible city of the poor was suddenly dramatically visible, to photographers for national newspapers and to local elites as well. One well-connected local reporter wrote in his journal: "people are wandering around, disoriented, like dogs without an owner. These people belong entirely to the humble classes. Is there no one in this city but the humble?"[16]

But this greater social—and perhaps even political—visibility did not produce greater political mobilization. Devastated and dispersed by the quake, the grassroots networks of labor and opposition activists were quiet in the aftermath. The winery elite, for its part, was still fearful of the mobilization brief periods of local populist rule had brought. Deeply critical of the liberal order they had helped to corrupt, the Catholic nationalist faction of the winery elite were looking for a way to banish liberalism and redirect the populist rhetoric of the military. Building on the solidarity of distress, some of these Catholic elites would argue, as the reporter did, that "the quake has made us all humble." By criticizing those who fled, they sought to reassert their claim to authority for having stayed. They would be aided in this by the military regime.[17]

For all their denunciation of previous elites and exaltation of workers, mil-

itary officials respected the martial virtues of hierarchy and unity and were keenly aware of the importance of acting quickly. Their contempt of the previous order was accompanied by a fear of chaos. Local officials thus quickly found common ground with the Catholic nationalists, granting them key positions in the administration, including the secretary to the governor.

The day after the earthquake the winery elite had presented the Interior Minister with a list of extraordinary demands: the state should compensate them for all their losses, repair their wineries at no expense, and conscript men to rebuild their factories, homes, and roads. Oddly silent on the enormous social crisis around them, the winery owners demanded 50,000 conscripts at a time when there were only 35,000 in the entire army. But while their requests for money and conscripts were turned down, this act of audacity ultimately only strengthened their position as spokesmen for the community. The same group quickly became the leading defenders of the city against the proposed move—and used this argument to continue demanding compensation.[18]

Even though the new site was only a kilometer away and on much firmer ground, the move was a blow against memories of urban community and a threat to urban property. The winery elite launched a campaign for rebuilding on the same site that proved extraordinarily effective in unifying a fractious elite and isolating advocates of the move. Distorting official arguments and ignoring the real problems the earthquake had revealed, the winery elite built on the widespread sense of dispossession at the heart of the earthquake to insist that the city must be rebuilt as it had been, where it had been. The campaign benefited from the tacit blessing of some local government authorities, the disarray of local populists, and above all the flattened nature of public debate in a devastated city under martial law. Even the many military officials in favor of the move remained reluctant to mobilize support or open up debate. Using the two conservative papers—the only local media to reappear after the quake—as their mouthpiece, the elite managed to battle rebuilding to an impasse. But in the polarization between refoundation and restoration, the opportunity for a broad civic debate about how to build a more resilient and inclusive city for the future was lost.[19]

The shape of the permanent city remained undefined, but a provisional city went up at great speed as the government scrambled to build tens of thousands of temporary structures. These projects represented the Argentine State's first major incursion into housing construction. Constructed by outside workers using experimental industrial materials, they were enthusiastically received by many homeless poor. They were undoubtedly an improvement over the improvised post-earthquake accommodations of most, and even over the pre-earthquake accommodations of many. The emergency city was the first step towards restoring normality and a major political achievement for the regime; the entrance to an exhibition celebrating the anniversary of the coup was bracketed by sample emergency houses.[20]

Yet this gift had its underside. By not involving local communities, paying local workers, or using local materials—against the recommendations of architects and engineers—the state had failed to use the opportunity to inject new

life and wages into a depressed community. It also produced structures that were exceptionally ill-adapted to the harsh local climate and insufficient to meet local needs. The houses were put up on available land all around the perimeter of the old city: most were in two vast projects with no amenities, with the rest spread across smaller sites nearer to downtown.

"The earthquake has torn down the dividing walls," the Catholic winery elite's paper claimed, "there are no social classes anymore."[21] In theory, provincial government officials were concerned with providing housing to those who most needed it: they exhorted the wealthy to build their own shelter and one minister proposed charging rent for emergency housing on a sliding scale. But the rent proposal was quashed, the exhortations came to little, and the allocation of housing quickly reaffirmed previous class divisions.

Every day for months the administration released a list with the names, professions, and family size of those receiving housing. And every list clearly showed how relief was being used to reinforce class: the better-built homes in the smaller projects were given exclusively to the middle and upper class, while housing in the two larger complexes went overwhelmingly to workers.[22] These were the ambiguous fruits of the first months of Peronism in San Juan: a promise of equality delivered unequally, a promise of renovation brought by familiar faces, and a promise of radical transformation neither fulfilled nor abandoned.

Insurgency and Settlement

The rest of the country was undergoing a tumultuous period of economic expansion and growing labor militancy, but San Juan remained in provisional quarters. For a year and a half, backroom struggles kept reconstruction at a standstill, as the state agency founded to supervise reconstruction sparred with local elites. Four teams of architects came and went, their plans unfinished and unpublicized, before a fifth plan was finally presented to the public. Any dramatic impulse in San Juan was blocked by the national government's growing concern with political survival and the provincial administration's allegiance to local elites. A telling measure of this breakdown was the regime's failure to distribute any of the funds from the aid collection.

The social agenda of the regime did reach the province, of course, as dozens of new unions were formed, salaries were raised, and working conditions improved dramatically for those who had work. Changes were evident in the vineyards and wineries, but not in rebuilding, the key social project promising work and a different future for all.

By mid-1945, the waning legitimacy of the regime gave way to an explosion of political activism on every level.[23] A vibrant national opposition denounced military "fascism" and demanded the immediate restoration of democracy. Yet these calls for restoration also shaded into calls for turning back the social transformation underway, for putting workers back in their place. The first laws struck down by the newly independent Supreme Court were those establishing courts to guarantee labor rights.

In San Juan, the opposition made reconstruction its central issue, calling for "houses, not plans" and insisting at a mass meeting on August 8, 1945 that "we will not be tenants on our own land!"[24] Opposition rhetoric centered on the loss of possessions—property, propriety and dignity—at military hands. While the leadership included figures of the left, the social base of the opposition was firmly within the elite, a more popular and inclusive version of the campaign against moving the city a year earlier. The reconstruction agency and emergency housing projects were lightning rods for criticism. The opposition denounced the reconstruction agency as a gaggle of pampered and ignorant outsiders. As for housing, a substantial part of respectable San Juan had found itself outside the four avenues, living next to those they had considered marginal, a situation that caused them "moral suffering."[25] Fiery opposition denunciations of emergency housing as "concentration camps" also included calls for reasserting privilege and restoring proper distances.[26] Focused on denouncing military imposition and emergency housing, the local opposition avoided the question of how San Juan should be rebuilt, asserting only that they should be the ones to do it.[27] As the government crumbled, even the winery elites who had dominated the provincial administration went over to the opposition, renaming themselves the "Party of Reconstruction" and reframing the effectiveness of their resistance as the ineffectiveness of official action.

The national opposition made San Juan a banner issue by simply inverting official claims. If the aid collection and relief effort had seemed like proof of Perón's effectiveness in advancing a different kind of politics, by now the mysteriously unspent collection and stalled rebuilding were evidence of the incompetence and callousness of the military regime. "Where's it gone, where's it gone, the money for San Juan" was one of the favorite chants in the late 1945 opposition rallies that led to Perón's dismissal and arrest. When surprisingly massive protest by the Buenos Aires working class rescued Perón from prison and returned him to power on the October 17, 1945, many in the opposition claimed that workers had been paid off from the collection.[28]

On a national level, the dynamic movement to win the presidency for Perón that grew out of the October 17 protests did not make San Juan a centerpiece of their rhetoric. Defenders of the government simply tried to shift attention from the specific matter of the aid collection that had not been distributed to the broader question of the overall relief that had.[29]

Within San Juan, Perón's supporters had great difficulty articulating a counter-vision for the city. A visiting opposition leader's claims that nothing had been done spurred Perón supporters to argue that "the pain and misery of *sanjuaninos* continues because the wealthy, the respectable, and the immense majority of local conservative politicians took possession of everything destined for the victims of the earthquake . . . The local administrations distributed aid advised by individuals who the people of San Juan point out and will never forget."[30] Such arguments that "the revolution has not reached San Juan" could explain the continuing power of local elites, but they could hardly account for San

Juan's role in the origins of the revolution. They could point out the extent to which emergency housing had been appropriated by elites, and the class bias in complaints of "moral suffering," but neither argument left official relief efforts in a particularly positive light.

On a fundamental level, local activists could not refute the opposition's common-sense demand for immediate reconstruction. The reconstruction agency had attempted to turn the political question of the future city into a technical matter, yet it had failed to reach any technical or political solution. In so doing, it had only ceded the space for political debate about the future city to its opponents. Unable to advance a persuasive counter-vision, Perón's supporters now simply shifted debate to whether the opposition who had built the city that collapsed should be responsible for rebuilding the city of the future, avoiding entirely what that city should look like.

The promise of citizenship Perón offered remained powerfully compelling. The pragmatic argument that "Perón delivers" proved successful, partly because of the government's crucial support for the wave of strikes and labor insurgency that extended well in 1946. But the cost of its success was forgetting one of the first things Perón was supposed to have delivered—a democratic new city—and closing off debate about what form that city should take.

This was a product of both the political failure of the reconstruction agency and the internal split among Perón's local supporters, between the new Labor Party and the old followers of Cantoni. When a last-minute decision by Perón denied one Cantoni the candidacy for governor, the *cantonistas* threw their support to the opposition. On election day, the conservatives won less than a third of the vote and lost by an especially large margin in the projects they had denounced as "concentration camps." But the defection had split the Peronist vote, and the new governor gained a legislative majority by inviting the conservative elite back into the fold. He took office with a speech that praised the initial actions of Perón and the national government but denounced the reconstruction agency for succumbing to "grandiose ideas" and "the delirium of intellectual pride" and called for simple, straightforward solutions that respected the rights of locals and property owners.[31]

The funds so dramatically collected in 1944 were slowly handed out in welfare grants to mothers, compensation for property owners, and building subsidies, purposes only vaguely connected to the direct suffering of the quake or the broad promises of social justice it had sparked.[32] A major organizing effort had created a union of reconstruction workers, the largest labor organization in the province. When rebuilding finally began, the government won labor peace and the support of property owners by firing all the workers, breaking the union, and reassigning the work of rebuilding to private building contractors. Fragments of the Peronist project for a New Argentina became evident in the devastated city in the form of labor rights, renewed popular dignity, and small clusters of new housing, yet the overall project was abandoned, and the city was slowly rebuilt along conservative lines.

Conclusions

If the disaster became a metaphor for the broader social crisis of the country, spurring a political response, that very metaphorical understanding came to obscure the specific experiences and demands of those affected by the disaster. The relief campaign and promises of transformation drew broad initial support, which official preferences for top-down solutions and fears of instability soon began to erode. Radical proposals for change opened up space for a debate about the future city, but official reluctance to permit any open-ended debate undercut the possibilities of actually advancing that change. The broad thrust of official actions systematically ignored and disqualified popular responses and experiences even in trying to attend to popular needs. The notion that much of Argentina was living the same social injustice as the homeless of San Juan also served to obscure the specific impact of local histories and the disaster itself on the people of San Juan. The disaster helped to bring a broader social injustice into view, yet the response to that injustice ultimately failed to address what was specific to the disaster. In spurring a wide-ranging political struggle for the future of the city, the earthquake also created the conditions under which the winners of that struggle would eventually render their victory seemingly inevitable and the disaster apparently politically inconsequential. In attending to the fragility of the transformation reconstruction once promised, we should not reach the same conclusion.

NOTES

1. On June 4, 1943, a military coup overthrew the last of the fraudulently elected democratic governments that had ruled Argentina since 1930. The military denounced not only the deposed regime but the liberal democratic order itself as fundamentally unjust and corrupt, proclaiming a need for social justice under authoritarian rule.
2. Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, *Eva Perón: A Biography* tr. Shawn Fields. (New York, 1996), 55.
3. Tom Horlick-Jones, "Modern Disasters As Outrage and Blame," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters,* 13 (1995): 305–16.
4. Benito Marianetti, *El racimo y su aventura: la cuestión vitivinícola* (Mendoza, 1965).
5. Mark Alan Healey, "The Ruins of the New Argentina: Peronism, Architecture, and the Remaking of San Juan after the 1944 Earthquake" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2000), 32–50.
6. Perón quoted in Norberto Galasso, *Vida De Scalabrini Ortiz* (Buenos Aires, 1970), 37.
7. Gary Kreps, "Disaster as Systemic Event and Social Catalyst" in E. L. Quarantelli, ed. *What Is a Disaster? Perspectives on the Question* (New York, 1998), 31–55.
8. Healey, "The Ruins," 59–106.
9. "No se reparará en gastos para la reconstrucción de San Juan," *La Voz Del Interior,* January 21, 1944.
10. "San Juan," *Los Andes,* Jan 15, 1946.
11. Perón quoted in César Civita, ed. *Perón, El Hombre del Destino* (Buenos Aires, 1974), v.1, 247.
12. See Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1955–1976* (New York, 1988).
13. Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millenium* (New Haven, 1974), 163. See also Martha Wolfenstein, *Disaster: A Psychological Essay* (Glencoe, IL, 1957).
14. Kai Erikson, *Everything In Its Path: the Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York, 1976).
15. There were widespread rumors of looting by troops; several officials were later disciplined.

16. Emiliano Lee, “Tren de evacuados,” *Tribuna,* August 28, 1944.

17. Emiliano Lee, “Tren de evacuados.”

18. “Para la reconstrucción de la ciudad se pide la conscripción de 50.000 obreros,” *La Voz del Interior,* Jan 17, 1944; “Se pide la emisión de un empéstito patriótico de 150.000.000,” *El Pueblo,* January 18, 1944.

19. On the formulation and frustration of plans for rebuilding, see Healey, “The Ruins,” 160–398.

20. Healey, “The Ruins,” 107–60.

21. “Buenos Dias,” *Tribuna,* March 27, 1944; Emiliano Lee, “La casa vacía,” *Tribuna,* August 21, 1944.

22. See *Tribuna,* April-June 1944.

23. See Félix Luna. *El 45* (Buenos Aires, 1971) and Daniel James, “October 17th and 18th, 1945: Mass Protest, Peronism and the Argentine Working Class,” *Journal of Social History,* 21 (1988): 441–61.

24. “Fue examinado el problema de S. Juan,” *La Acción,* 9 August 1945.

25. This politics of class distinction was evident from early on: see “Debe facilitarse la construcción de la vivienda de emergencia popular,” *La Acción,* September 26, 1944. For role of class in opposition politics, see Healey, “The Ruins,” 400–62.

26. “Quedó Constituida la C. Vecinal de Trinidad Pro-Recons. de San Juan,” *La Acción,* August 27, 1945

27. The only exceptions to this were professional associations of engineers and architects, but their arguments were not taken up by political leaders or local social movements. See Healey, “The Ruins,” 463–527.

28. On the protest, see Daniel James, “October 17th and 18th, 1945. The claim is widespread in opposition memoirs, for example Raúl Damonte Taborda, *Ayer Fué San Perón: 12 Años De Humillación Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1955), 65.

29. For example, “Aqui está la verdad sobre los dineros de San Juan: Enmudezcan las voces de la calumnia,” *El Laborista,* February 26, 1946.

30. “Lo que no Sabe y le Ocultaron al Dr. Calcagno,” *La Reforma,* February 1, 1946.

31. “El Mensaje del Nuevo Mandatario,” *Tribuna,* May 26, 1946.

32. While the funds were never fully accounted for, this ceased to be a concern for the opposition, even after Perón fell.