

Vocation and political activism: sacrifice, stigma, love, utopia?

Sian Lazar

Department of Social Anthropology

University of Cambridge

Free School Lane

Cambridge CB2 3RF

Abstract

In this article, I explore religious languages for political activism through values commonly given as reasons for becoming a unionist in Argentina. My interlocutors repeatedly emphasised their sense of vocation and service, as well as love, commitment and passion for the cause and for fellow activists or workers. Together, these related values comprise the sacred aspects of political activism, which is informed by a specific history of the blend between Peronism and Catholicism since the mid-20th Century.

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Introduction

In October 2015, I was invited to recreational facilities belonging to the Argentine public sector trade union UPCN¹ for a day long team building meeting organised for the union delegations of the Ministry of Economy (Economía) by the Escuela de Formación Sindical (School for Unionist Training, run by UPCN). The facilities were located about a 2 hour drive south of the city of Buenos Aires. I arrived in a van, along with the Director of the school, two other leading figures in UPCN, and three of the facilitators, who would run the day's events. Around 100 UPCN Economía unionists made their way to the facilities either in their own cars, or on the bus provided by the union. The facilities consist of a large green area, with swimming pool available in the summer, sports grounds, picnic areas, a large hall, and a large covered area with a grill and long tables. When we arrived in the morning, the meat was already being prepared on the enormous grills, ready to feed everyone at lunchtime.

The UPCN unionist training school had been running these events for around a year. Sometimes as frequently as once a week, but generally once a fortnight, they invited different delegations of union activists to a day of games, workshops, relaxation, and *asado* (barbeque). The idea was to bring people together to have fun, promote reflection on their work as union delegation, and build a sense of themselves as committed UPCN members. I was told that for the better-functioning delegations, activities were more playful, whereas for others perceived to have internal problems, greater emphasis was given to discussion and the resolution of conflicts. Economía was considered one of the well-functioning delegations, and so the day was playful. We began with a breakfast in the covered area outside, while everyone arrived, then moved on to warm up games in the hall – for example, people were each given a line of a

¹ UPCN – Unión del Personal Civil de la Nación. Most unions in Argentina have recreational facilities for their members. These are the remnants of a situation in the mid-20th Century when unions provided significant leisure facilities for their members, including hotels on the coast.

song, and they had to find the others with the same song and sing it together at the end. The groups then moved outside and played more party games together, cycling through the different ones available in their groups when the facilitators told them to. Then it was lunch time, which culminated in the moment when someone got his guitar out and led the group in singing songs together. The facilitators of the event delayed the afternoon activities so that people could enjoy the singing, which they called ‘alegría Peronista’, or ‘Peronist joy’. The songs ended with a rousing rendition of the marcha Peronista, the anthem of the Peronist movement.

In the afternoon session, the delegates were organised into groups and set training tasks to discuss where their delegation has come from and where it is going to in the future. My group, of about 25 people, went just outside the hall to sit at picnic tables and benches under the trees. Before starting our main task, group members had to introduce themselves to each other, and they were told to give their name and one word for why they had become a union delegate. The words chosen were (in order):

Vocación [eventually 4 people in total chose this] - vocation

Ayudar – to help

Lealtad - loyalty

Convicción [5 people chose this] – conviction

Colaborar [2 people chose this] – to collaborate

Elección – choice

Me gusta [2 people chose this] – I like it

Militancia [3 people chose this] – activism

Compañerismo [2 people chose this] – comradeship

Peronismo [2 people chose this] – Peronism

Servicio – service

It is true that the delegates who opened with the term ‘vocación’ set the scene for the others, who then also after a point needed to find a range of words to describe their motivations. That is to say, they could not all say the same thing. Yet, the list coincides very well with interview material I have been gathering since 2009, when I have been exploring why people choose to be activists in their trade union. Many of the same tropes appeared both in my interview material and in this list, especially those of vocation, service (including collaboration and help) and conviction. They also chime with recent ethnographies of activism in different Peronist political groupings, where anthropologists have documented their interlocutors’ narratives of commitment to the cause, orientation to the collective good, and loyalty to the movement (Quirós 2011, Gaztañaga 2010, Balbí 2007a).

The group was then divided into three sub-groups, each given an identity of astronaut, sailor or walker. They were told to discuss the past, present and future of their delegation based upon the different temporalities associated with that identity (long, medium and short term). At the end of the discussion, the synthesis the group decided on in order to share their discussions with the wider group spoke with great fervour of the importance of collective action and fellow feeling, and ended with the phrase ‘despite all the adversities, [if we stand] together, there is no obstacle that we cannot overcome’. When delivered at the plenary session later, it got the biggest applause of all the group summaries.

Vocation

In this article, I focus in particular on the expressions of vocation that I encountered in activities such as the training session described above, as well as in interviews with union activists about their motivations. Weber’s famous essay *Politics as Vocation*² suggests that

² <http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Politics-as-a-Vocation.pdf>.

“There are two ways of making politics one's vocation: Either one lives ‘for’ politics or one lives ‘off’ politics. ... He who lives ‘for’ politics makes politics his life, in an internal sense. Either he enjoys the naked possession of the power he exerts, or he nourishes his inner balance and self-feeling by the consciousness that his life has meaning in the service of a ‘cause’. In this internal sense, every sincere man who lives for a cause also lives off this cause. The distinction hence refers to a much more substantial aspect of the matter, namely, to the economic. He who strives to make politics a permanent source of income lives ‘off’ politics as a vocation, whereas he who does not do this lives ‘for’ politics.”

This distinction between political action as service (‘for’ politics) and as profession (‘off’ politics) resonates strongly with tensions over political activism in Argentina, where Weber’s point that most political people do both is often lost in both academic and popular commentary. Julieta Quirós addresses this in her book on activists in a peripheral neighbourhood of Great Buenos Aires (2011). She argues that political scientists and other commentators tend to work through two moral images of local politics, namely resistance and clientelism. This limits the analysis of motivations for grassroots politics to the two extremes of ideology and economicism, the latter understood as what they can get in return for their work. Instead, her ethnography shows the complexity of motivations and understandings of what local political action involves, which might include economic return but also are very strongly about commitment and collectivity. The space between ideology and interest is the theme of this article. It is of particular resonance for union activism in Argentina because of tensions surrounding the relationship between that and politics. I suggest that union activism is a form of political activism, if only because the relation between worker and employer is an inherently political relation of power. But that politics takes different forms. For some unionists, as I explain below, their activism is an expression of their political commitment to

Peronism or other political movements. For others, their commitment is to unionism as political action in itself, regardless of specific political allegiance; and from the outside, their activism is often seen as corrupt political activity.

Weber also tends to counterpose rational interest-based activity (usually but not always economic interest) to a more innate sense of being called to action; most prominently in his writing at the service of a charismatic leader (1968). Yet Fernando Balbí (2007b) rightly cautions us against unproblematically applying Weberian ideas of charismatic authority to Peronism, because it assumes that the movement is fuelled just by personal devotion to a charismatic leader. Instead, he suggests, we must explore ethnographically the ways in which the movement draws strength and its adherents conceptualise their belonging, in changing social and historical contexts. Balbí (2007a) focusses on the concept of loyalty to Perón, while others have emphasised their interlocutors' narratives of commitment (*compromiso*) (e.g. Quirós 2011). I found a striking convergence around the idea of vocation, and discuss it in this article as living 'for' politics (in the context of the stigma associated with being accused of living 'off' politics) as well as a narrative of motivation that combines secular political commitments with Christian, specifically Catholic resonances. The religious element in the discourse of vocation grants activism something of the sacred, I suggest. Here, I define 'sacred' quite loosely as that which has to do with the spiritual or religious, albeit including the Durkheimian sense of the sacred as that which is made special and protected from the profane (Durkheim 1965 [1915]). Indeed, the ways that activists use religiously-informed narratives in part to avoid the taint of corruption that is associated with living 'off' politics could be seen as an enactment of the continual need to maintain boundaries between the sacred and profane aspects of political activism. One of the aims of this article is to explore the possibility of the 'political sacred', an overlapping of the realms of religion and politics in the sense not of political action associated with particular religious ideologies but a

more diffuse conceptual space where aspects of politics are understood through (partially) religious forms and modalities.

Vocation is an ambivalent term in how it mixes an innate sense of suitability with a calling that comes from the outside – God, for Christian vocation, or in Weber’s formulation, the ‘cause’ or leader. For the Argentine unionists with whom I work, that which is innate and internal is best understood as a kind of essence that can be brought forth through cultivation, including in training sessions and interviews with foreign researchers (see Lazar 2017). In this case, vocation is especially linked to Peronism for those activists who identify as Peronists, which includes most unionists in UPCN, and many in the other union I worked with, called ATE (Asociacion de Trabajadores del Estado, Association of State Workers).

Peronism is the political movement founded by Juan Domingo Perón in the 1940s, and it remains the most important player in Argentine politics today. It is not easily categorised as either left- or right-wing, and has been through classical populist, neoliberal and post-neoliberal phases since its beginnings. Perón was first elected to power as President in 1946, but deposed by military coup in 1955, when his supporters entered a period of clandestine resistance, demanding his return from exile, which was eventually allowed in 1973. Shortly after, he became President again, but died a year later as the country slid into the most traumatic period of its recent history. A wave of grassroots labour activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s combined with increased activity by right-wing militias and left-wing guerrilla groups. Powerful economic and political sectors responded with a military coup, backed by the US like others in the region³. The military regime of 1976-83 was one of the

³ See Basualdo (2011) for a discussion of labour activism at the level of the shopfloor in the 1960s and 70s.

Peronists could be found alongside Trotskyists and Communists among the shopfloor stewards and in left-wing guerrilla groups like the Montoneros, but there were also conservative Peronists at the highest levels of union bureaucracy, who tended to support government regimes including military ones. The most extreme conservative

most brutal in Latin America. After the return to democracy, the next Peronist regime was that of Carlos Menem, in 1989-99; followed after the 2001 economic crisis by Eduardo Duhalde (2002-3) and then Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in 2003-2015.⁴ The military dictatorship of 1976-83 brutally targeted grassroots unionists for torture and disappearance and began a phase of economic restructuring on neoliberal principles, which was continued under Menem. Both experiences have deeply affected the emotional politics of contemporary Argentine unionism. Although the political expressions of Peronism have varied quite substantially over the course of the 20th and early 21st Centuries, Peronist activists consider their adherence to the movement to be something more than party politics. They often describe it as a way of life, or a deep feeling (*un estilo de vida, un sentimiento*); and for many it is something that is in their blood, or in them ‘from the cradle’ (see Lazar 2017 for more detail). Certainly, it is felt as a deep attachment, especially for those politically active in the movement.

Peronism has a close association with Catholicism. The historian Lila Caimari has described Peronism as ‘the most catholic political tradition of our country, and also the most heretical, the point of greatest closeness between the Church and State, and the point of most violent confrontation’ (2002: 444, my translation). In the early days of Perón’s political career, he based his social policy explicitly on the Catholic social doctrine, of the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* of Leo XIII and Pio XI (Caimari 2002;

wing of the moment ran right-wing death squads (the AAA, or Alianza Anticomunista Argentina or Argentine Anti-communist Alliance).

⁴ This very brief description of Peronism does not give a sense of the complexities of Peronism for many adherents as an identity and way of life, not just a political orientation. In Author (2017) I explore that complex picture for one group of Peronists (the UPCN unionists); but there are many studies of Peronism across different periods of its history. For some of the best, see (Auyero 2001; Halperin Donghi 2012 [1994]; James 1988; Karush and Chamosa 2010; Levitsky 2003; Martuccelli and Svampa 1997; Munck, et al. 1987; Torre 2002; Torre 2012).

Zanatta 2013). As President, he also allowed religious education in public schools, a longstanding Church demand. By 1954, though, he had moved into confrontation with the Church, and the Church hierarchy was one of the key actors in the coup against him in 1955. Thus a deep Catholic religiosity and strong anticlericalism have coexisted within Peronism since the 1950s, as the catholic nationalism of the military combined with the heritage of earlier currents of socialism and anarchism (Caimari 2002; Zanatta 2013). With the rise of Marxist liberation theology in the 1960s and 70s, the mix became even more complex, as both Peronism and the Church split between Marxist groups, the extreme right (in the Church's case represented by those in the hierarchy prepared to collaborate with the military juntas) and a centre-right 'orthodox' Peronism (Burdick 1995). The latter was associated with a conservative Argentine version of liberation theology called 'theology of the people' (Ivereigh 2017), the tradition with which the current pope was aligned when he was a young priest in Buenos Aires.

The Christian version of Peronist vocation is a mix of the 'theology of the people' or liberation theology - depending on activists' political viewpoints - with the Catholic nationalism and Christian spirituality of Juan Perón. His iconic second wife, Eva Perón – Evita – described a passionate vocation for service in her book *La Razón de mi Vida* (The Reason for my Life). This was an enormously popular publication at the time of writing in 1951, and it is still widely read today. One short chapter is titled 'Vocation and Destiny', and in it she says that political work was her destiny, her mission, forged by 'that which some call Destiny and others Providence, and almost all of us attribute to God' (Perón 2006 [1951]): 30, my translation). Evita's death from cancer shortly after she published La Razon de mi Vida was then and is still frequently interpreted as a sacrifice for her people, after she had worn herself out through her commitment to work for social justice (Navarro 2007 [1981]). The mythification and sacralisation of Evita's body after her death is well-known, from the huge

crowds that gathered for her funeral to the stealing of her body by the military in 1955, and its eventual return to the country in the early 1970s (Eloy Martinez 1997; Fraser and Navarro 1996).

Today, many of my Peronist interlocutors combine this kind of religiosity with a secular progressive politics in how they understand their activism, and it is the background to how they talked about their sense of vocation. However, it is important to point out that first, there is a wide range of political viewpoints among unionists (including many Trotskyists and socialists, especially in ATE); and second, even the Peronist unionists I knew did not perceive themselves as engaged in explicitly religious politics. My interlocutors were generally Catholic, but not especially observant. They tended to be broadly secular, e.g. in favour of abortion rights and gay marriage, and often anti-clerical. Their political inclinations were broadly economically left wing and socially liberal, and they saw their work as unionists on a spectrum from a kind of practical problem-fixing in the real world to social movement activism in favour of political revolution. Thus, my discussion of the religious aspects of their sense of vocation is not intended to point either to a kind of religious politics or to a specific ideological allegiance. Instead, it is an example of how religious ideas slip into political narratives and ethical self-formation; and from there to action, which I have explored ethnographically in other work (Lazar 2017). Here I suggest that this brings something of the sacred into the political realm, which, again in somewhat Durkheimian fashion, is focussed especially around a reverence for the collective, as I show in the following sections.

Stigma, passion and love

My ethnographic work with the two major unions of state employees in Argentina spans the period 2009-2015, and includes interviews with unionists, attendance at plenaries, assemblies, and other meetings; participation in courses for new and experienced delegates and

demonstrations, press conferences, and other public events. In 2012, I spent several weeks accompanying a UPCN delegation at their place of work, an important Ministry located in the centre of Buenos Aires. My main interlocutors were union leaders, from union delegates⁵ at the level of the administrative unit (e.g. government department) to those with positions in the central offices of the union. Both unions represent workers employed by the state, at varying levels of public administration, not just civil servants but also researchers, health workers, even stage hands, actors and musicians in state-run theatres. UPCN is mostly Peronist, considers itself to be ‘organic’ and ‘verticalist’, and is prepared to negotiate with the government in power, who are at the same time the employers. ATE is more ‘horizontal’, and at the time of my main fieldwork strongly emphasised its autonomy from party politics and its affinity with social movement unionism⁶. Both are highly critical of their rivals and have very different political projects (See Lazar 2017).

Yet both sets of activists had much in common when they explained their personal motivations for their activism to me, and many of the tropes from the list described in the opening to this article appeared also in my interview material with activists from ATE, UPCN and other unions. Ideas especially those of vocation, service (including collaboration and help) and conviction constantly emerged in our discussions. Miguel Romero, a long-time unionist for ATE, explained his political activism as

“something innate that you have [...] despite all the difficulties you have. [...] It’s a kind of priesthood [*sacerdocio*], you see? A kind of vocation [...]. You go on

⁵ The Spanish term is ‘delegados’. The equivalent position in a UK factory would be union shop steward. The delegates are the union representatives at the level of the workplace.

⁶ More recently, parts of ATE have allied with political movements that follow Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, former President and currently (2020) Vice-President.

changing the form, the method of struggle, the political conception [...]. What doesn't change is this vocation for service, it's a vocation for service.”

“Con esto se nace”, he said: you're born with this. He had a trajectory of political militancy that ran through unionism and the youth wing of a Catholic workers organisation, and was therefore located squarely within a religiously-informed tradition of Peronism.

A delegate at the Teatro Colón Opera House, from a different union, took a similar line, saying that even when he had tried to leave unionism he could not do it. It was for him a question of nature, personality. When I asked him what it was about his nature that meant he could not leave union activism, he pointed to what he considered to be an inherent, natural reaction against oppression. He explained his vocation in terms of class sentiment and rage against injustice, to which there were only two responses: submission or fight:

“There are comrades who are more submissive towards the reality that we live, and other comrades, and we're not prepared to let go of many questions that go against the feeling of class that you have as a worker. I think it's a vocation and from nature, from the rage that you feel because of the situations of the workers, and that are not dealt with by either the legal powers, political powers, or the social organisations. And they leave you with the only alternative, which is to confront your boss.”

Compare Evita's words in *La Razón de mi Vida*, where she suggests that all her life led up to her political action, her social work in service to the cause. She asks:

“Why have I always suffered when faced with injustice? Why have I never resigned myself to seeing the poor and the wealthy as a natural and logical thing? Why have I always felt indignant when faced with the owners of power and money exploiting the humble and poor?” (Perón 2006 [1951]: 31, my translation)

Others involved in unions, in both an activist and professional capacity said more simply that they liked it. One lawyer who worked in the office of the national ATE leadership said that she “[*se fue*] *enganchando con el derecho de trabajo*” (became hooked on labour law), but that it was also her vocation in a more professional sense. Julieta Quirós (2011) has also noted the importance for Peronist activists of becoming ‘hooked’ (*enganchado*) by activism. For the lawyer, being ‘on the side of the workers’ made her happy in her work (“*es lo que me da felicidad para hacer mi trabajo*”). An UPCN member felt similarly. He found union work highly demanding but spoke of it as very exciting and something he liked a lot because “you know that whoever is on the other side has needs, or has interests that you like to defend, and you’re part of that.”

The idea of vocation was not confined to interview material, where it could be perhaps just a narrative of motivation for belonging that was considered acceptable for consumption ‘on the record’ by a foreign researcher. It also featured heavily in other discursive spaces. It was constantly reiterated, for example, in training sessions run by UPCN for delegates, both from teachers and participants; as my description above indicates. The relationship between these kinds of narratives and the political action that results is beyond the scope of this article and discussed elsewhere (Lazar 2017). Here I focus more on the narrative itself. I argue that it introduces an element of the sacred into the discourse, albeit a sacred aspect that is rarely made explicit beyond the use of religiously-informed language⁷.

The focus on vocation must be understood in the context of the frequent accusation that activists act purely out of economic interest (Quirós, 2011). In both interviews and training sessions vocation was often placed against a backdrop of wider condemnation of unionist activity, associated most closely with a sense of unionists as corrupt, and out for their

⁷ Another language that informs political action is psychotherapeutic, which I discuss in Lazar 2013, 2017 with respect to the idea of ‘containment’.

personal interests. My interlocutors considered that this popular stigmatisation was directed at both ordinary delegates and at the higher levels of union leadership, although with the greatest ire reserved for the latter. This is the other side of Weber's definition: the notion that politicians live 'off' politics, which very quickly becomes an accusation, in Argentina as elsewhere. Public sector employment is often also negatively viewed, as civil servants are thought to be corrupt, lazy, rude, and so on. One contentious stereotype is the *ñoqui*, the state employee who turns up to his or her office only at the end of the month, when families traditionally eat gnocchi and salaries are paid.

Unionists often pointed me to a popular sketch show from some years ago that features the recurring character *la empleada pública* (the civil servant). The comedian Antonio Gasalla plays the role of a state employee who sits with her colleague at the same desk and plans ways to get money from the public. There is always a queue of waiting members of the public, and petitioners come to hand over their forms and pay the charge; when they leave the two employees divide up the money, and Gasalla leans over the wastepaper bin to rip up the forms and throw them away.⁸ Accurate or not, the stigmatisation of the supposedly bureaucratic and inefficient state employee was particularly acute at the time of state reforms in the 1990s, when politicians and media figures alike often blamed the 'crisis' of the state on the workers. This was functional in making acceptable the worsening of their labour conditions at the time, and this powerful discursive trope was revived after the assumption of a right-wing President in December 2015. He used it to justify large scale redundancies in the public sector at the beginning of his regime, arguing that many of those he fired were merely *ñoquis*, political appointments of workers on temporary contracts made at the last minute by the previous government⁹.

⁸ For example, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xl49AYEJiqE>

⁹ Unsurprisingly, views differ about the truthfulness of this claim.

Unionists are even more stigmatised than public officials. I had innumerable conversations with people not directly associated with my research where my description of my project was met with exclamations of horror and stories of the wealth, corruption and criminality of unionists. And almost all of my unionist informants thought that the general public had a very low opinion of them. It was of particular concern for ATE activists, because they were very keen to distinguish themselves from the more traditional unionism of UPCN and allied Peronist groups. They would often tell stories about the corruption of other unionists, and – implicitly or explicitly – the contrasting moral rectitude of their own leaders and activists. However, for most ordinary people, there was little to no distinction between the two kinds of unionisms.

In the face of stigma, vocation for service was often allied to a sense of passion and commitment to the cause, fellow workers, or to activism itself. Nestor Llano, who had come to ATE in the early 1970s, said that he ‘fell in love’ with ATE during the process of recovery of union democracy after the dictatorship, in 1984. And Pablo Micheli, former Secretary General of ATE-Nacional and then Secretary General of the CTA¹⁰, spoke in similar terms in an interview in 2011. After telling me about a very serious illness that he had suffered the previous year, he said:

“I am in love with this cause, and that produces in me a conviction that makes me live. I am happy, do you understand? I am very happy. I mean, it’s not that I’m happy fighting with the bosses, but I have dignity [soy digno], I feel that I am doing something just, and that I haven’t enriched myself by being a union leader. ... What keeps us going is the freedom of conscience. What can I say to you, there isn’t perhaps a rational explanation, there’s an explanation that has to do with *la mística*. When I

¹⁰ Central de Trabajadores Argentinos; Argentine Workers’ Central – the Union Federation of which ATE is a member.

say to you that I am in love with this cause, in love with the CTA, I definitely feel a profound love for what I do, for this thing we do, I feel very happy with my *compañeros*, each thing we do ... I enjoy it.”

Micheli is a very experienced politician, well-used to giving interviews and speeches, and so one should probably take some of his more passionate declarations with a pinch of salt.

However, his reference to the *mística* of being a unionist is reflective of a wider point. It is not a coincidence that he uses a word that is very closely associated with the cultural activities of the MST in Brazil, where there is a well-known philosophy of the *mística* as what Daniela Issa (2007) describes as “love for a cause, solidarity experienced in collectivity, and belief in change”, imparted through a collective pedagogy of artistic and theatrical events.

Happiness, collectivity and utopia

For the unionists, love and passion were not individual emotions, but were derived from the experience of collectivity. Others took up the theme more explicitly in order to explain their passion and enjoyment of political activism, for example:

“Well, first because you do this because you like it, you love it, you feel it profoundly; if not, you don’t do it; and well I think that unionism is the most humanitarian question. Representing your work comrades [*compañeros de trabajo*] is a very big personal satisfaction. When you [fight] for the comrades who are often very oppressed, really have a lot of problems, well, going into battle for this, for other injustices... The private bosses are fierce [*bravos*], but the politicians when in government are tremendous, tremendous. So there are situations of a lot of injustice, and well, logically, to be able to fight for your work comrades, to be able to represent your work comrades, it’s a satisfaction.”

Note in this and previous quotes the recurrent expressions of satisfaction and happiness.

Happiness evokes the effervescent Peronist joyfulness of the lunchtime guitar session at San Vicente, but also references a political perspective on how governments should act. This is because happiness is as much an aim for the unionists as justice is, and this feeds into their utopian imaginings.

Yet they do not so much imagine a utopia for the future, emphasising instead one that lies in the past, specifically the period 1946-55, when Juan Domingo Perón was President. For activists from both ATE and UPCN, that period was something of a golden era (see also Senèn González and Bosoer 2012: 25). People told me about the introduction of collective bargaining, the promotion and expansion of labour unions, introduction of labour union-based welfare schemes, Eva Perón's social assistance programs, public housing schemes, and nationalisation of the railways and other enterprises¹¹. All these measures brought substantive citizenship and social rights to a much broader spectrum of Argentine society than ever before, albeit still limited to male formal sector workers and their recognised dependents (Grassi 2003). For example, Néstor Llano said:

“This country had 10 years of happiness with Peronism – with all the differences that you can have and all the problems there were. Here, at that time, everyone had work, the grandparents had excellent retirement benefits, there was no malnutrition, none of the pests that are appearing now, that had been eradicated from Argentine – yellow fever! This didn't exist, I mean, there were prevention policies. ... So a kid grew up, arrived [at school] fully nourished, he could think, he could study, he could play, he could, he could and he could.”

¹¹ For a more or less definitive history of the first Peronist government, see the volume edited by Juan Carlos Torre in the *Nueva Historia Argentina* series (Torre 2002), especially the chapter by Torre and Pastoriza on welfare (Torre and Pastoriza 2002). On housing, see Aboy (2007).

In fact, some of the positive measures that informants commonly attributed to Perón were actually established properly in later regimes or in fact resulted from the fights of the labour movement prior to the mid-1940s. However, there is no doubt that the period of 1946-55 saw considerable strides forward for Argentine workers; and many contemporary unionists view that period of progression as one that was not repeated. People often said that those were *los años más felices* for Argentines, the happiest years. Utopia here is indexed by the enumeration of specific advances in workers' rights, but also by happiness itself.

From time to time, some of my interlocutors created a more recent nostalgic utopia in similar terms for the years of the Kirchner presidencies in 2003-15. An example of this is a Facebook status update from one of the unionist leaders I know, which described his participation in a mobilisation to support Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner as going out to “support the woman who made the Argentine people most happy after Perón”. [*A bancar a la mujer que más feliz hizo gobernando al pueblo argentino después de Perón* (13 April)]. “Let’s never forget”, he said, “that the happiest days were always peronist” [*no olvidemos jamás que los días más felices siempre fueron peronistas* (12 April)]. This formulation of words is, as the above quotes also show, a common turn of phrase among Peronists. Fervent Kirchnerists frequently describe 2003-13 as *la década ganada*, the decade that was won, a play on the ‘lost decade’ of the Latin American debt crises, or 1990s neoliberalism. It is too early to say whether 2003-15 will become a new nostalgic utopia for Peronists, and it will depend upon how the political climate develops. But what both nostalgic utopias show is the complexity of the temporalities of utopia-making: utopias can be in the past as well as in the future. A temporality of return is here a powerful utopian construction for political action.

In the everyday, though, UPCN mostly sees itself as problem-solving, with its future-orientated philosophy being one of building strength as an organisation so that it can react effectively to threats to its affiliates’ jobs and working conditions. This is the work of their

unionist activism: negotiating with employers, organising protests or social events, enlisting people for training courses or childcare schemes, helping to organise health care and so on (Lazar 2017). This everyday labour is a feature of activism in other political spaces, as shown by Quirós and Manzano's work with activists in poor urban neighbourhoods (Quirós 2011, Manzano 2013; see also Auyero 2001, Gaztañaga 2010). ATE is perhaps at times more utopian in a conventional sense, with its promotion of the 'new unionism' of the CTA (Central de Trabajadores de Argentina, Argentine Workers' Central), influenced by a kind of social movement unionism and envisaged as necessarily independent from traditional party politics and peronism (Lazar 2014, 2015). For a while, the CTA project for society more widely coalesced in the initiative of the Constituyente Social, a kind of Argentine Social Forum. In 2007-2010, groups affiliated to the CTA – which includes both unions and territorial organisations, as well as some indigenous organisations – met to discuss common political projects, which a campaign document produced by the communication team summarised as “Wealth *redistribution*, participatory and integral *democracy*, national and community *sovereignty*, plurinational integration in *Latin America*” (emphasis in original). However, as the CTA succumbed to problems of factionalism from 2010 onwards, the Constituyente Social lost political momentum. The force of networked activism remained strong but moved elsewhere, especially to recent campaigns against state repression and gender violence, in which ATE and CTA members have taken part, but which they do not lead.

ATE's power and influence though does not rely upon its ability to sustain future-oriented utopian projects through the CTA. As with UPCN, on the whole, ATE's actions are often reactive, as they mobilise in response to someone being fired, or multiple firings; or to a reorganisation; or to claim a salary increase commensurate with inflation. This is especially important in times of increased pressure, as with the current regime, which is not nearly as

friendly to unions as the previous one was. Utopian visions of the not-present must interact with reactive political action in attritional time (see Lazar 2014). It is important to note that the vocation that calls activists to create utopias also sustains them in their work to resolve problems in the present.

Vocation and the sacred in political action

Many unionists consider their work to be a joyful outcome of something innate to them; a genuinely passionate commitment to something beyond their own self-interest or grievance, which enables them to keep going in the face of stigma and some hardship. At least, that is how they explained it to me and to each other during workshops at the UPCN training school, and the less formal ATE training sessions for new delegates that I attended. The obvious anthropological response to this is to question what happens when people don't or can't act according to this philosophy, or alternatively to be sceptical about whether people are just enacting a hegemonic discourse when speaking of their enjoyment. To an extent that is of course true: many of these utterances were quite self-conscious, even when they took place outside of formal interview situations; and there is a remarkable coincidence between the discourse of different delegates, leading to multiple renditions of the same ideas. It is evident that some kind of hegemonic operation is taking place, and of course that is explicitly one of the aims of the training in the UPCN school.

But might scepticism about the authenticity of feeling do as much violence to the truth of people's feelings as entirely unquestioning acceptance? We should not abdicate responsibility for analysis, but total scepticism might well simply perpetuate the stigma against which unionists mark out their activism and attempt to create boundaries between the political versions of the sacred and profane in their action. Would it make a difference to take seriously what people say as something that they genuinely believe to be true and try to live

their lives by, even if they don't always do so consistently? My informants spoke romantically of a kind of affective drive that kept them going in the face of hardship and mundane sacrifice.¹² Or even, as one leader said simply, "if you didn't like it, you wouldn't do it". Union delegates are not forced to do the job that they do, so they must in some sense 'like' it, and it seems to me to be reasonable to pay attention to this when they tell me about their motivation for action.

If we do so, then questions of happiness, joy, love, commitment and vocation become conceptual entry points into the sacred aspects of political activism. Like sacrifice, they are the means of mediation between the mundane and the sacred, a form of consecration (Hubert and Mauss 1964 [1898]). If so, what kind of sacred is at stake, in this highly politicised environment?

As I described above, it is most likely a kind of Catholic sacred, although not explicitly articulated as such. My interlocutors generally saw themselves as secular, but they were also influenced by the Peronist Christianity I described above, not least through their common store of knowledge about the ideas and discourses of Evita and Juan Perón. I only noticed the Catholic aspect to my interlocutors' activism after Jorge Bergoglio was elected Pope in 2013, as a significant number of them expressed their pride in this Argentine, not to mention Peronist, Pope. In a trip in October 2015, I discovered a UPCN leader who had known Bergoglio personally through his youthful Peronist activism, while others assured me that he had been a member of a Peronist *agrupación* or political grouping. I assume that they were referring to the Guardia del Hierro movement, although I did not ask at the time. They were insistent that he had been a Peronist in his youth. In December 2016, one UPCN political leader told me that the person he thought was articulating the best position of a

¹² On romanticism, see Maskens and Blanes (2013). This affective drive is also expressed through psychotherapeutic language (Lazar 2013; Plotkin 2001). Cf also Quirós (2011) on activist labour as sacrifice.

Peronist leader was Pope Francisco, and he suggested that the two most recent papal encyclicals were Peronist in their argument for a “more human capitalism” and against inequality. This claiming of the Pope for Peronism is not confined to politically-active Peronists. More broadly, internet memes also play on his Peronism, e.g. by showing photoshopped pictures of him making the Peronist V-sign¹³ and suggesting that he was reluctant to engage with Mauricio Macri, the right-wing President from 2015-2019, by circulating images that show tense body language between the two. When Cardinal, he had an at times tense relationship with Cristina and Néstor Kirchner, but once he was elected, Cristina made efforts to patch that up, and the photographic evidence published seemed to show quite warm interactions.

That said, it is important to stress again that most of my interlocutors would not see themselves as Catholic activists *per se*. They were unionists, Peronists, on the side of the workers, and so on. The kind of sacred I am describing should be seen as one aspect of their multifaceted activism rather than a religious politics or ideology. It is, however, informed by a strong tradition of political Catholicism, implicated in Latin American trends of activist Catholicism that go back to Liberation Theology, the relationship between Church hierarchies and military regimes across the region, and the relation between Peronism and Catholicism.

Could this be a kind of political sacred? If so, it has a deeply collective character, drawing on histories of base-level community activism of a religious kind, but also trade union mobilisation of all stripes. The sense of vocation that calls activists to activism, to listen to their innate desires to be of service, etc., draws from a kind of collectivity that rests on being with others in a political sense, and on sociality in the day-to-day and on special occasions (Lazar 2017). Recall the calls to *compañerismo*, collaboration, and loyalty from the

¹³ In the UK and North America, we interpret this as a V for Victory sign, but in Argentina it signifies V for Vuelve (Return) and was the sign made by Peronists to call for Juan Perón’s return from exile.

group activity described at the beginning of this article; and Micheli's reference to a Brazilian social movement notion of *mística*. The unionists build an understanding of themselves and their action in the world that is a kind of secular sacred. It is not precisely a Durkheimian society-as-sacred, because it is an explicitly transformative vision of a world otherwise. But nor is it purely an ideological project, not least because in the day-to-day it is in practice more a kind of error-fixing response to the failings of contemporary society than a deeply prescriptive alternative vision or utopia. The calling is best described as the inhabiting of particular kinds of political activism, which have their own rationale and joyfulness specifically associated with their nature as collective.

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