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# The Politics Of Melodrama: The Serialization Of Populism In Kirchner's Presidency

## ABSTRACT

As part of a diplomatic tour to the United States in 2012, now ex-president of Argentina Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, gave a series of speeches at various institutions of higher learning. The Argentinean press covering the President's visits coded their analysis following a melodramatic code reminiscent of popular serialized programming known in Latin America as *telenovelas* (Soap operas in the Anglo-American media context). Conservative and right leaning media outlets used the telenovela formula to construct Kirchner as a villain, due to her promotion of a populist participatory democracy in opposition to neoliberal economic policies. Journalists followed the Kirchner tour closely, and each of her visits were framed as episodes full of the genre's markers with clearly delineated cliff-hangers, explosive revelations, and competing dichotomous characters. In order to understand the uses of melodramatic paradigm, I am proposing a close reading of the staging, performance and the speeches Kirchner held at Harvard University. I argue in this article that Kirchner employs the code of melodrama to speak to her constituents, but it is also her adversaries which frame a condemnation of the President using similarly structured telenovela paradigm. I am interested in addressing how the telenovela/melodramatic code is appropriated by both opposing political sides and the implications this has on the television genre as a purveyor of political discourse.

## KEY WORDS

Populism. Political Discourse. Peronism. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

# 1. Introduction

On December 10, 2007 Cristina Fernández de Kirchner became the first democratically elected female president in Argentina. In her first election she won with 45% of the electorate and in her subsequent re-election in 2011, Cristina Fernández won with a higher electoral margin, winning a total of 54% of the votes.<sup>1</sup> Since the return of democracy in 1983, no other woman has held so many varied and influential political positions. She has served as Senator for the province of Buenos Aires, as well as for Santa Cruz. She was an elected member within the Chamber of Deputies for Santa Cruz, as well as for Río Gallegos, and held the position of First Lady under her husband Ernesto Kirchner's presidency (2003-2007). Most recently she became Vice-President, after the 2019 election of incumbent President Alberto Fernandez.

The mere mention of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's name in Argentina, from now on referred to as CFK, generates a polarizing effect fueling passionate opinions from both followers and detractors. Kirchnerist's, or CFK followers, popularly referred to as K's, quickly enumerate the party's achievements during her tenure. Some key projects and legislation include the expansion of the welfare state in the form of a Universal Child Allowance<sup>2</sup>, which extends monetary and medical benefits to children of families who are (under)(un)employed, or whose salary falls below the national minimum wage.<sup>3</sup> Another initiative by CFK's party includes *Connecting Equality*, aimed at transforming education by focusing on developing student's digital literacy. To this end, the program distributed 3 million laptop computers, within a three-year period to public school students. The focus of the program aimed at closing the unequal gap in areas of access to technology and digital literacy among public school students, in comparison to their private school counterparts. Another central piece of legislation includes the passage of marriage equality, a first in a Latin American Nation. Through the work of grass roots organizations, CFK's party sponsored the law which led to an uninterrupted 15-hour debate in the Senate. The law passed on July 2010.<sup>4</sup>

The enacted programs and legislations align with the party's ideology, defining the role of the state as a safety net meant to improve and safeguard the lives of its citizens. In part, many of these programs were enacted to counteract neoliberal policies, known in the region as the *Washington Consensus*, carried out by the political establishment throughout the 1990s. This period was named the *Década perdida*, the *Lost Decade*. The Decade sought to modernize Argentina and allow it to participate within the globalized economy through its adoption of neoliberal recommendations, such as greater fiscal discipline, trade liberalization, and the redirection of public expenditure. Argentina's strict adherence to the model awarded the nation international praise. The International Monetary Fund deemed Argentina the *star pupil* who prescriptively followed the model. As the role of the state retreated in favor of a free market economy within a peripheral nation, it created the perfect storm for economic, social, and political collapse. In November of 2001 international investors began to withdraw their deposits

<sup>1</sup> GAUDÍN, A.: *Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner Begins Second Term with Flurry of Activity*. [online]. [2020-02-10]. Available at: <<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14022>>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information regarding the Universal Allowance see: GROISMAN, F. et. al.: *Políticas de Protección Social y Participación Económica de la Población en Argentina (2003-2010)*. In *Desarrollo Económico*, 2011, Vol. 51, No. 202/203, p. 241-262. ISSN 0046001X. [online]. [2020-02-10]. Available at: <[www.jstor.org/stable/23612383](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23612383)>.

<sup>3</sup> ROCA, E.: *Asignación Universal por Hijo (AUH): Extensión de las asignaciones familiares*. In *Revista Debate Público*, 2011, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 33-34. [online]. [2020-02-05]. Available at: <<http://trabajosocial.sociales.uba.ar/revista-debate-publico-no1/>>.

<sup>4</sup> COOPER, M.: *The Argentinean Movement for Same-Sex Marriage*. In PULLEN, C. (ed.): *LGBT Transnational Identity and the Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 102-113. [online]. [2019-05-28]. Available at: <[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057%2F9780230373310\\_7](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057%2F9780230373310_7)>. For more information on marriage equality in Argentina see: SCHULENBER, S.: *The Construction and Enactment of Same-Sex Marriage in Argentina*. In *Journal of Human Rights*, 2012, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 106-125. ISSN 1364-2987. [online]. [2019-06-06]. Available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14754835.2012.648153>>.

ultimately leading to the collapse of the banking system resulting in the largest debt default totaling more than US\$155 billion.<sup>5</sup> Overnight, people lost their savings as banks closed. Due to limited space and scope of this research I am simplifying the events and causes that led to the greatest economic crisis faced in Argentina. However, part of this context is relevant to the research at hand, since these events created the scenario in which the Kirchners' acquired a central role in Argentinean politics. I return to this key point in the discussion section. Having provided a brief overview of Kirchnerist policy and ideology in relation to the changes that took place in Argentina since 1990, this introduction now shifts to providing the narrative of the opposition which provides a different read of the events taking place throughout the 12 years of Kirchnerism.

Kirchnerist opposition<sup>6</sup> established a clearly defined narrative reinterpreting the combined presidencies of Ernesto and CFK. The opposing political rhetoric focuses on a three-tiered axes, yet all sharing the same point: Kirchnerist policies have undermined the independence of the three branches of government endangering representative republicanism. A common repeated slogan by the opposition stated Argentina was on track to becoming the next Cuba and Venezuela. For example, in the case of Universal Child Allowance, the opposition claimed that while the objective of the program helped a wide segment of society, there were multiple similar plans that were not consulted. Thus, the Universal Allowance passed by decree and not by a greater consensus. The second related element relates to Kirchnerist economic policies that reject neoliberal free market economies in favor of the development of internal markets. Those in opposition claim that an insular economy shields the nation from global interconnections, facilitating the party's disproportionate control over the region's economies. Lastly, and perhaps the one most relevant to this research relates to CFK's communicational style. Critics point out that while she may not be a dictator, the president's inability to communicate openly with the press, shifts the limits further into a state of authoritarianism. Certain members of the press claim the president only speaks to those journalists that profess K sympathies.

A common element found among official K narratives as well as from the opposition rests in the ability to both conjure strong emotions. For Kirchnerist sympathizers CFK's legacy provokes a sense of pride but also strong passion, love and devotion. Followers feel vindicated and protected ready to confront the growing inequalities as a result of globalized free market economies. On the other hand, those opposed to Kirchnerist policies feel CFK's projects were mere fronts to illicitly enrich those loyal to the party. Rather than seeing international markets and global capitalism as an external threats, the opposition sees Argentina's supposed retraction from global markets as a sign of economic, political and socio-cultural isolation that threatens the republic. Thus, K detractors position themselves as indefatigable defenders of liberty and democracy. Furthermore, both narratives expose a highly melodramatic discourse, each one appropriating the narrative mode to their respective needs.

## 1.1 Research Questions and Objectives

As I argue in this research, melodrama functions as a discursive strategy to inform political discourse. In order to expose the innerworkings of melodrama in politics I employ the strategies of discourse analysis and carry out closed readings of political speeches to understand the role of melodrama in configuring CFK's political thought. As a cultural form, melodrama operates

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<sup>5</sup> MUNCK, R.: International Journal of Political Economy. In *International Journal of Political Economy*, 2001, Vol. 31, No. 3, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> For more in depth information regarding opposing parties and their relationship to media see: BOTERO, S. et al.: Under Friendly Fire: An Experiment in partisan Press, Fragmented Opposition and Voting Behavior. In *Electoral Studies*, 2019, Vol. 60, p. 100-121. ISSN 0261-3794. [online]. [2019-06-06]. Available at: <10.1016/j.electstud.2019.04.008>.

as a malleable genre able to adapt to multiple cultural products including film, television, music and literature. At the same time, melodrama also has the potential to inform and operate in other areas, such as in structuring political rhetoric. The archive of my research thus centres on former president of Argentina Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's diplomatic tour of the United States in 2012 and her public address at Harvard University in the John F. Kennedy's Forum of International Politics. I am interested in analyzing CFK's public address on September 27<sup>th</sup> of 2012, as a way of understanding the event as a public performance designed to stage Kirchnerist ideology grounded in populist rhetoric and poised against tenants of free market economies. In part, this research questions and interprets populism not as a carrier of a specific ideological and political thought, but simply as a way to communicate ideology. In tandem to populism, melodrama also plays a role in facilitating, in serving as a strategy to communicate political ideology. Thus, this article articulates CFK's political discourse as the confluence of melodrama and populism. In my analysis populist rhetoric relies heavily on melodramatic forms to construct and shape its narrative made comprehensible to its political subjects. To be clear, melodrama does not dictate populist policies, nor does it establish a fixed definition of what constitutes populism. Instead melodrama serves as a communicative strategy. Telenovelas as an industrial and cultural product that embodies Latin America's form of melodrama follows a strict aesthetic and thematic code. This code allows for its reproduction and dissemination, but what has become increasingly noticeable within the last few years, is the influence of the telenovela code in structuring other genres, other forms of cultural production. It is throughout the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner where we begin to see telenovela codes coming from the president's own political party but as well from as the economic elite that organized in opposition to Kirchner. As Kirchner's political capital grew, so did societies polarizations. However, this polarization, in terms of media representations has gone beyond confronting opposing political ideologies such as the left vs. the right. Instead it has become much more primal, invoking an excess of emotion, reminiscent of a melodramatic code that filters all experiences through an emotional lens.

## 2. Conceptualizing Melodrama and Populism in Latin America

### 2.1 The case of Melodrama

The influence and centrality of the melodramatic formula informing political discourse has at times stood at odds due to a perceived incompatibility of forms. For the most part, melodrama has been a mode of representation linked solely to the cultural industries. As such there are multiple studies theorizing the reach of melodrama as a purveyor of mass culture. Film and television studies across linguistic, national, cultural boundaries have documented the genre's ability to codify conceptions of pleasure, domesticity, and gender roles.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, political discourse and political practices, while influenced by mass culture, see itself within a separate sphere. In the monograph *Orgies of Freedom*<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Anker provides an incisive account

<sup>7</sup> For the study of melodrama across various fields and linguistic research see: BARBERO, J.: *Communication, Culture, and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*. London, Newbury Park : Sage Publications, 1993. BROOKS, P.: *The Melodramatic Imagination*. New Haven, London : Yale University Press, 1996. LANDY, M. et al: *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*. Detroit, Michigan : Wayne State University Press, 1992. MAZZIOTTI, N.: *La Industria de la Telenovela: La Producción de Ficción en América Latina*. Buenos Aires, Argentina : Paidós, 1996. SADLER, D.: *Latin American melodrama : passion, pathos, and entertainment*. Urbana, Illinois : University of Illinois Press, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> ANKER, E.: *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*. Durham : Duke University Press, 2014, p. 10-11.

which topples the wall separating both melodrama and politics and reveals how the former shapes political discourse as a means to galvanize the public's perception of events. Within this perspective, Anker begins positioning the attacks on 9/11 and the subsequent military response by the United States as a key moment where melodrama and politics collide. The political narrative surrounding the use of force by the US, closely mirrors the ethos of melodrama as it creates a „spectacle of destruction“ perpetrated by a set of dangerous terrorists and therefore situates Americans as the victims who must defend the „spectacle of destruction“. <sup>9</sup> In other words, the state's military response codes the use of force not as a destructive retaliation, but rather as a necessary retribution speaking to virtue. <sup>10</sup> Thus, the United States' justification for use of power/violence rests on its moral imperative to maintain the binary *good* and *evil*. The concept of the hero here functions as a metaphor of the nation and its citizenry.

As Anker states „*Orgies of Feeling investigates the history, political strategies, and affective pulls of melodramatic political discourses*“ <sup>11</sup> within the limits of the US context. While my research focuses broadly on Latin America, and specifically Argentina, still Anker's text validates melodrama as a discursive strategy employed by a political apparatus to legitimize and communicate its goals, be it expansion, military operations, economic models, etc. To do so it employs the genre's formula which includes a virtuous hero who is tested and victimized by an outside threat, but ultimately regains its strength and triumphs over adversity. Similarly, CFK's populist discourse also pinpoints a key moment to galvanize strong opinions and situate her restitutive political project. The moment is the economic and social effects set in motion by the largest default and economic collapse in Argentinean history in 2001. While it was the downfall of the country, Kirchner's discourse employs the downfall as also the resurgence of a cultural and social change that Kirchnerism will sustain. According to this narrative the Kirchner presidencies restored the possibilities for women and all those deemed marginalized by economic and social policies to once again have a voice. Global capitalism is thus centred as the culprit and Kirchnerism as the formula to restore social justice and order.

Within a Latin American context, the pairing of politics and melodrama has produced various studies and monographs on the subject however, as opposed to the work of Anker, Latin American scholars have taken on a cultural studies methodology that favors a shift to cultural production as a way of understanding the significance of the texts. One of the earlier texts that paired melodrama and politics include Doris Sommer's *Foundational fictions*. <sup>12</sup> Sommer's work provides a groundbreaking study that establishes the connection between romantic literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the political nation building process that began during the post-colonial era in Latin America. This text lays the foundation to understanding the role of cultural production, specifically literature as a political strategy to spread liberal ideas in Latin American nations after the wars of independence. Sommer's work parts from Benedict Anderson's notion of *Imagined Communities* <sup>13</sup> which postulates the notion that mass print literature fueled a sense of national community in readers since the texts shared a common language, a shared sense of history, and created a national market of cultural goods. Sommer utilizes Anderson's theory and applies it to the romantic literature by Creole writers who legitimized their position as national leaders by creating highly melodramatic texts about star crossed lovers who served as metaphors for the author's nation building projects. As Sommer relates, it is no coincidence that the literary canon of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Latin America included authors with key positions

<sup>9</sup> ANKER, E.: *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*. Durham : Duke University Press, 2014, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed study of 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic literature in Latin American nation building project see: SOMMER, D.: *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> ANDERSON, B.: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York : Verso, 2016.

in governments and in politics. Many of the authors included in Sommer's studies became presidents of their respective nations. Thus my work in this research is informed by the reach of melodrama as a cultural form with the capacity to shape and communicate grand narratives that can be understood and followed by large segments of society.

## 2.2 The case of Populism

A challenge that arises when researching and writing about populism includes the myriad of academic and non-academic literature that compete for establishing a stable definition. In most media representations and in even some academic literature, the term is used as a marker, as code that stands in for something negative. It is used to explain its effects on underdevelopment in Latin America, as a challenge to liberal democracies and it has even been used to describe its ability to introduce political clientelism. The literature treats the term *populism*, and *populist* as an all-encompassing blanket term deemed to define policies and leaders that put into question liberal democracies. Part of the problem rests in these representations inability to distinguish not only the political differences and nuances, but the socio-cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts that inform the specificity of its deployment and site of enunciation. A clear example includes the lumping together of various political leaders without distinguishing their disparate and often contradictory political ideologies, but nonetheless included in the same category. Case in point, Bolivia's former President Evo Morales, a left leaning social democrat who advocates for the rights of the marginalized indigenous population receive the title of *populist*, in the same way as the conservative right winged white nationalist Donald Trump, in the United States.<sup>14</sup> These two leaders could not be more different, yet media and academic literature employ the terminology without providing context.

In more nuanced studies that complicate and provide a broader conceptualization of populism, includes the work developed by Ernesto Laclau.<sup>15</sup> In *Hegemonía y estrategia socialista*, Laclau exemplifies that for meaning to be extracted from political discourse it must be relational and able to build on prefigured practices and contexts as a way to avoid an essentialist understanding of the term. For Laclau, populism presupposes that marginalized subjects raise their voice in order to question their subordinate position in society, however in this framing, there must be a clear antagonist that stands in the way of those attempting to escape marginalization. It is for this reason that I argue that melodrama and populism are closely linked since they both rely on narrative strategies of opposition and struggles. It is important to insist, as does Laclau, that populism does not necessary contain a specific ideology, but rather it is a tool that constructs a political space organized around equivalent subjects and negates those that stand against it. Other frameworks that have defined populism, shifts from Laclau's political identity formation vis a vis an adversary, to what some have identified as a *pacto populista*<sup>16</sup> or a populist pact. Rajland considers the populist pact on the socio-economic matrix employed by nations that lie on the periphery of global capitalism. In other words, for Rajland, populism is more of a tool that allows the state to set in place mechanisms that stabilize and harmonize inequalities between the subaltern and the dominant classes. This combination of

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<sup>14</sup> Academic literature has established differences but there are still scholars that while they do not categorize as all populist leaders as having the same political ideologies, they do find how they employ similar strategies. See: DE LA TORRE, C.: Trump's populism: Lessons from Latin America. In *Postcolonial Studies*, 2017, Vol. 20, No. 2, p. 187-198. ISSN 1466-1888. [online]. [2020-01-15]. Available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13688790.2017.1363846?scroll=top&needAccess=>>>.

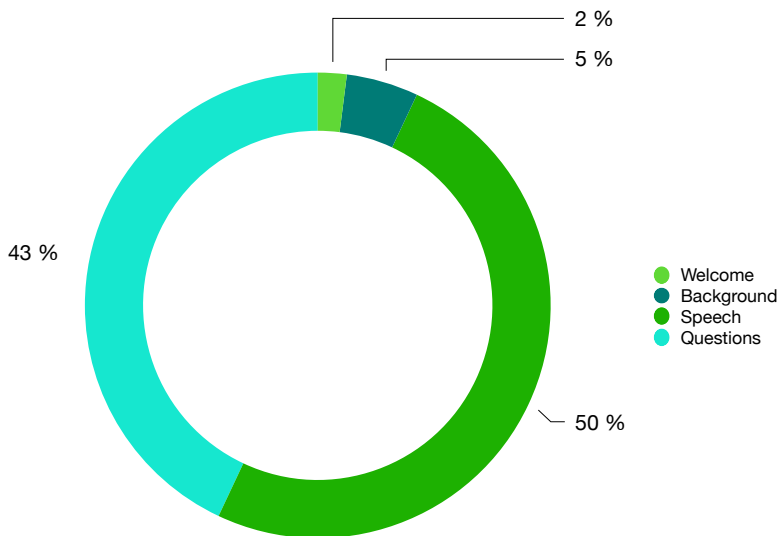
<sup>15</sup> For an in-depth study of populism in Latin America see the following: LACLAU, E. et al.: *Hegemonía y estrategia socialista: Hacia una radicalización de la democracia*. Madrid : Siglo XXI de España, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Beatriz Rajland has employed the term *populist act* to explain the innerworkings of populism. See: RAJLAND, B.: *El Pacto Populista en la Argentina: Proyección teórico-política hacia la actualidad*. Buenos Aires : Ediciones CCC, 2012.

shared antagonisms against an enemy and the need to stabilize peripheral post-colonial nation into a broader global economy is part of the blueprint for Kirchner’s populism. Kirchnerism as a populist political ideology attempts to provide answers to the social displacement and the retreating role of the state that has played during the worst economic collapse in the history of the country during December of 2001, and thus makes possible the configuration of two opposing groups. There needs to be a process of identification that organizes and moves groups that have been historically displaced because of racial, class, or political and economic turmoil that might have excluded subjects from full participation. Within the populist Kirchnerist party it incorporated a wide segment of social actors and identities including: the LGBTQI community, university scholars and intellectuals from the left, the scientific community, and those perceived as working class, all mobilized against the traditional elite and those identities deemed functional to the right, such as certain sectors of the Catholic church, the military and the economic elite.

### 3. Findings

On September 28, 2012 the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum at the Institute of Politics at Harvard University hosted then President of Argentina Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The event included mostly an audience of students, faculty and several diplomats including the Ambassador of Argentina. I categorize the event, a performance of melodramatic diplomatic populism in its attempt to showcase the reach of argentine populism as an alternative to US neoliberal and free market policies. CFK’s overall message is to provide a corrective definition of populism, as it is a highly contested term. The performance lasted one hour and forty minutes and the chart below organizes the categories making up the presidential speech with the percent of time devoted to each category.



**FIGURE 1:** *The pie-chart provides the percentage of time CFK dedicated to each topic throughout her talk*

Source: own processing, 2020

**Categories:**

1. Welcome and Ground Rules by Dean Ellwood: 2 minutes
2. Invited Speaker’s Background: 5:00 minutes
3. Plenary Speech: 50 minutes
4. Question and Answer Period: 43 minutes

From the onset, it might seem irrelevant to delineate and measure the amount of time devoted to each section, since the order and progression of the whole gathering falls in-line with most invited plenary talks. As one can see from the categories, there is nothing characteristically different. The Dean thanks the guests, provides a brief introduction to the speaker, etc. However as discussed in the next section, it is important to highlight the percent of time spent on each section, particularly the plenary talk and the open question and answer period. The discussion below interprets the last two categories of the talk as the site where melodrama and populism merge in order to make intelligible the political communicative act established by CFK's performance.

## 4. Discussion

The following discussion is organized following the four main categories identified in the Findings section.

### 4.1 Welcome and Ground-Rules

The moderator of the plenary talk opened the forum to general acknowledgements to faculty, students, and dignitaries. Dean Ellwood quickly turned to discuss the ground rules, and while it took up only 2% of the time, in relation to the rest of the talk, the rules clearly set the tone for what would be a contentious conversation among CFK and the students. He opens this part of the talk to remind everyone of the importance of „*freedom of speech*“ and the value that the John F. Kennedy Institute places on „*open and civil discourse*“ and how these values have made the Institute a premiere site for informed debate. Ellwood continues to stress the two basic ground rules which include allowing the speaker to get through their talk and then allowing the audience to ask „*unfiltered questions*“. For Argentine audiences, the ground rules stated by Ellwood acquire greater significance based on the viewer's political standing, thus having the capacity to resignify the importance of those rules. As mentioned in the introduction, the opposition has established a narrative with highly melodramatic tones that situate CFK as an autocrat who vilifies and discredits the role of the press. And for those who follow CFK, they see this moment as an example of the president's participation in open forums that encourage open debate.

The anti-press narrative created by the opposition became widely diffused about the time the legislative branch began discussing the ruling party's support of the Audio Visual and Communications Law. This law passed by a majority in both legislative houses in Argentina on October 10, 2009, and was signed into law by CFK. Part of the law promoted the repeal of the former communications law promulgated during the last military dictatorship, which favored and helped solidify media conglomerates such as Grupo Clarín, in return for propaganda supporting the military coup. Through its participation and collaboration with the state, Grupo Clarín now comprises the largest media oligopoly in Argentina. Among various amendments, the new law sought to diversify offerings and ownership by restricting broadcast licenses for ten years. License renewals would depend on a series of requirements such as 60% of its programs must be national productions and 30% of programming slated for local educational and informative/news. Thus for the opposition organized around the concentration of media and economic control framed the law as an issue of limiting freedom of press, and of silencing dissident voices, rather than the ruling party's attempt to regulate and diversify the market by curtailing oligopolies. Under the Questions and Answer section, this issue will be addressed further, however it remains clear that the issues of „*freedom of press*“ and „*open and civil discourse*“ is not only part of the ground rules, but the main issue at stake throughout the talk, as well as the question and answer period.



## 4.2 Background

Part of the Dean's presentation follows the conventions regarding introducing a speaker since he briefly describes CFK's achievements as President, but also outlines some criticism in an effort to provide a balanced picture of the speaker. However the element of the presentation that stands out the most concerns the rhetorical framing of Argentina as a prosperous and developed nation. The elements focused on by the speaker reveals the site of enunciation from which the narrative emerges. The United States as one of the strongest economies of the world, operates as an empire with its political and economic reach, extending far beyond its borders, historically perpetuating a neocolonial relationship with Latin America. Thus, Argentina's national profile presented by the Dean focuses mostly on the potential economic viability Argentina holds for the United States. Therefore the nation is defined by its economic value as reflected in the following lines, *„Argentina is a nation of vast national resources, well-educated and sophisticated population with a globally and competitive agricultural sector and a diversified industrial base, rather than by its socio-cultural and historic legacy.“*<sup>17</sup> Any socio-cultural and historical importance remains secondary as there is no extractable value. *„It has a vibrant culture and a rich history. The varied and diverse backgrounds of the argentine people is reflected in the nation's grand architecture. Fine cuisine and positive outlook“.*<sup>18</sup> As these last quotes reveal a much more generic message applicable to any nation, whereas the first lines include more concrete facts, as a testament to what is valued by the United States.

The introductory background continues with a shift from a brief detail of Argentina to presenting a political and biography of CFK. Once again the opening biographical lines structure and frame CFK as a leader following a melodramatic and serialized tone. By serialized I am making a reference to the melodramatic form that is relevant to Latin America, which is the telenovela. Such melodramatic programing as described previously, structure its narrative following an ethos of passion as the element that makes serialized narratives intelligible to audiences. Telenovelas do not value facts and deep and well developed characters, but rather favor characters who make sense of the world through the power of their emotions and passions. Ellwood similarly utilizes the language of passion to define CFK, and thus demarcate the ways in which the plenary talk will play out for the audience. Ellwood states, *„What is clear is that this president fights passionately for the policies and people that she champions. It should come as no surprise that she has consistently placed high on the Forbes's list of 100 most powerful women in the world.“*<sup>19</sup> Added to the emotional charge includes yet another element of serialized melodrama including the sense of battle and the moral imperative to fight for those in need. The introduction proceeds, *„It [Argentina] also has a tradition of strong female leaders. Evita Perón was the first female president. Our guest is the second, but she is the first woman elected president of Argentina.“*<sup>20</sup> While his facts are incorrect, Evita never became President and only held the position of First Lady, the speaker establishes the trajectory and links that connect CFK to a Peronist genealogy of powerful female leaders. In the invocation of a female political worldview reinforces melodramatic elements, since historically melodrama has been viewed as a female genre. The section concludes with a series of CFK policies and projects that have been recognized internationally in terms of successful economic and social policies such as economic growth sustained at 8- 9% per year and the creation of the Ministry of Science and Technology. This new Ministry helped to repatriate Argentine scientist who due to economic hardship and lack of funding had to go abroad to continue their research.

<sup>17</sup> Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's Public Address (Full Video). [Online] [2019-12-05]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9LY4qhXEXs&t=1224s>>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

### 4.3 Plenary Speech

CFK's talk at Harvard reiterates the theme and structure of her plenary speech at the United Nations the previous night. In both talks CFK espouses on what she titles and defines as a „*new civilizing era*.“ By this term CFK extends a solution to the global economic crisis that has affected not only emerging nations, but the central economic powers of the world. She explains that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the leading economic and socio-political nations of the world have conceptualized solutions that reproduce western thought influenced only by the Greco-Roman world. Even nations with competing and multiple world views have turned to the West as a response to their crisis. She cites the case of Latin American and their search for independence from Spain. The elite in those regions turned to European concepts emerging from the French Enlightenment in order to not only become independent but trace and configure the ways their new nations would be established. CFK interprets this act as a mistake since liberating a region employing the same ideals that led to those colonial relationships cannot render success. The illustrative example is one of many provided by CFK which highlights the „*vicious repetitive cycles*“ that have constantly looked inwards and to the West for answers. Thus for CFK the civilizing era is a stand-in for the concept of progress, a progress which must turn to the developing world and the Global South for answers to issues such as terrorism, the concentration of wealth in the top 1% of the world, the breakdown of a plural participatory democracy, and speculative financial economy over production and innovation.

For Latin Americanist CFK's deployment of „*civilizing era*“ is extremely reminiscent of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's conception of „*civilization versus barbarism*.“<sup>21</sup> Sarmiento was a writer, statesman, and was a member of the Generation of 1837, who highly influenced the region's conception of culture and national life. Sarmiento's work develops one of the most influential metaphors that would define part of the political and intellectual landscape of 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin America. In his text, Sarmiento establishes the binary civilization vs barbarism as a means to model development in Argentina. Civilization for Sarmiento represented the values of Western Europe, placing a heavy emphasis in the work ethic of the West and the civil and political institutions, as the backbone for freedom and progress. Whereas barbarism, represented the autochthonous cultures and traditions of Argentina and Latin America. This binary set up by Sarmiento and resignified by CFK extends the melodramatic element of diametrically opposed views who must confront and battle each other. It is presented as a moral imperative following the melodramatic logic of serialized narratives.

CFK's resignification of the term enacts a reconfiguration of that which is considered «civilizing». Whereas Sarmiento saw Western culture and institutions as the backbone of civilization and that which will uplift non-western societies, CFK's „*civilizing era*“ proposes distancing from the West in order to incorporate the plurality of voices that have been silenced and marginalized. As she states: „*There is a contradiction between developed countries and emerging countries. The emerging countries, we have precisely been the ones who have sustained worldwide economic activity, as well as the growth of the world's economy during the last decade. The economies of developed countries grew very little and it is precisely the emerging countries who have sustained such growth.*“<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the speech, CFK does not read from a teleprompter or notes, but rather projects as if it were an impromptu talk. Due to her style one can see elements of an unscripted conference such as the circular statements «emerging/developing countries» that repeat throughout her talk as if she is organizing her thoughts as she speaks. The repetitive nature of her discourse

<sup>21</sup> Sarmiento's conceptualization of civilization vs. barbarism is developed in his foundational text: SARMIENTO, D.: *Facundo, Civilización y barbarie: Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga*. Mexico : Editorial Porrúa, 1966.

<sup>22</sup> *Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's Public Address (Full Video)*. [Online] [2019-12-05]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9LY4qhXEXs&t=1224s>>.

also corresponds to the melodramatic formula, since serialized narratives tend to be circular in nature, always referring back to previous moments. As mentioned previously also melodrama favors the emotions and the focus on personal narratives over any other discursive style. In CFK's speech this personal element makes itself present in her use of the first person plural, to refer to emerging countries. CFK inserts herself in the position of an emerging country that has had to respond to the crisis created by developed nations. Furthermore the continuous repetition of the emerging and developed countries reinforces a dichotomous binary which melodrama always establishes to categorize that which is *right* and *wrong* or *good* an *evil*. In Latin American telenovelas one of the recurring plots include storylines that categorize characters as either rich or poor and the social struggles that exist among both groups. Generally the poor are represented as hard-working, honest, and willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of others. While the rich are generally portrayed as manipulative, shallow, and stand as obstacles the main character's happiness. Clearly CFK follows the paradigm and situates developed nations as the ones who create situations that make it difficult for others emerging nations to « succeed ». CFK adds, Precisely we, the emerging countries, are the ones who can once again reactivate the economy for one simple reason, we have a very low level of debt in relation to our GDP.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.4 Questions and Answers Period

The more illuminating part of the plenary talk belongs to the questions and answer period which occupied almost the same amount of time as the talk. For the interest of my research, the student's participation and CFK responds further aligned with the melodramatic paradigm. As part of the replies there were plenty of cheers and jeers as well as applause, nervousness and ironic replies. At the beginning of the talk the Dean referred to the Forum as one of the premiere sites for intellectual debate and as such, the presenters have the opportunity to speak and then have to take probing questions. It is important to point out that out of the total of ten questions asked, only three were related to CFK's talk. In the three related questions, students followed up on her main thesis regarding the civilizing era where emerging nations must take a more central role in the economic and political decisions of the world. Students asked about the role of countries such as Paraguay and what role they play in the economies of the region. Also students asked about the upcoming US elections and its possible effects in the region and lastly what roles should G-20 countries play in relation to social responsibility.<sup>24</sup> The remaining seven questions have no relations to the talk, but rather replicate many of the headlines and talking points articulated by journalists with a clear opposition to CFK. One finds a common denominator among the questions which attempts to frame the speaker as an authoritarian leader whose goal is to perpetuate herself in power. Questions such as:

*„Many people in your government or in Congress have been talking about the possibility of a constitutional reform that would allow for your reelection. There were large protests in Buenos Aires and in the country in opposition to this possibility, according to my understanding. Yet you have not responded. Do you want to be re-elected and do you want to reform the Constitution?“<sup>25</sup>*

<sup>23</sup> Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's Public Address (Full Video). [Online] [2019-12-05]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9LY4qhXEXs&t=1224s>>.

<sup>24</sup> I have translated the flowing three questions: This is a very important year for our US friends, because it is an electoral year. How do you think the result can impact our country? How do you now see the bilateral relationships between Argentina and Paraguay and in their future role in the Mercosur? Being part of the G-20, and having conversations with other leaders, what is the position in regards to the importance of social responsibility in the long term, not only regarding Argentina but in the whole world.

<sup>25</sup> Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's Public Address (Full Video). [Online] [2019-12-05]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9LY4qhXEXs&t=1224s>>.

„In light of the constant attacks to media, intellectuals and specific journalists, not necessarily opposing ones but simply critical ones, that have taken place during your government, do you think there is a plurality and freedom of expression in Argentina?“<sup>26</sup>

These two questions directly reference the possibility of a constitutional reform that would serve to undermine democracy in the country, coupled to a sense of censorship or possible retributions against dissident voices. In the local Argentine press the framing of the silencing of journalists began, as mentioned previously, during the proposal to pass the new Audiovisual and Communications Law that would break up Clarín's monopoly, currently the largest media conglomerate in Argentina. While the law was passed in 2009, and currently in 2020 the law has still not been applied, speaks in hindsight to the weakness of the question posed at the time of the talk. The same journalists and media oligopolies continue to operate in Argentina, making the goal of the law which sought to diversify media outlets unable to materialize.

In order to exemplify the way media messages reach citizens, I turn to a highly publicized episode taking place in one of Clarín's television shows. I illustrate this point with a segment of the show PPT, known by its Spanish language acronym meaning *Journalism for Everyone*. PPT crosses the boundaries between news and entertainment, public affairs and pop culture in the likes of shows like Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. Jorge Lanata, the show's creator and host, has a long trajectory in investigative journalism, and in 1987 he founded the progressive leftist newspaper still in circulation, *Página 12*. Lanata's return to television marked a dramatic shift in his ideological standing considering that he was hired by Grupo-Clarín, a network known for its hardline conservative right-wing views. After an analysis of PPT, it is evident that the show was created to generate opposition to the political, social, and cultural transformation initiated by Kirchner's party. The show's formula borrows directly from US formats, such as the Daily Show and the Colbert Report. The structure and objective of shows like the Daily Show create the possibility of critically questioning power through comedy, satire, and parody, targeting the tenants of truth and objectivity that have formed part of traditional broadcast journalism. This combination results in dissident political messages that blur the distinctions between news and entertainment, but that nonetheless facilitates audiences questioning of key political and social issues. However, PPT simply borrows the structure without reproducing the intended aim of questioning the role of corporate journalism.

The show stages opposition through its monothematic premise whereby every week it reveals a critique of the president but presented as fact, and it extends the trope of good vs evil, the us versus them trope. Each episode begins with a stand-up monologue by Lanata, who is not a comedian, but nonetheless performs a parody of the president's speeches and demeanor. There is an excess of close-ups, over emphasizing the face and eyes, once again a staple of telenovela framing. Lanata's linguistic parody and satire- of which there are multiple layers operating in his monologue: the parody of the professional stand-up comedian, that of US comedy/news shows, and lastly that of the president's ideology. However here, both satire and parody ceases to function since it does not have the capacity to dismantle nor critique power. As the stand-up monologue ends, the audience begins to hear from off stage a chant that states: *queremos preguntar* « we want to ask ». This leads to the raising of the stage's curtain, revealing a stage full of prominent news personalities from the group's media platforms continuing in their chant. This staging of saving the press fails as does the previous monologue, since it reinforces the voice of the journalistic corporate establishment. PPT loses its ability to critique power since it is staging its own strength through the image of key television and radio personalities standing in opposition to the president. PPT's chant of „we want to ask“ makes its way to citizens who replicate media messages as we see at Harvard's forum. One of the students

<sup>26</sup> Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's Public Address (Full Video). [Online] [2019-12-05]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9LY4qhXEXs&t=1224s>>.

opens his question by stating „I’m privileged to be one of the few Argentineans who can ask you questions“<sup>27</sup>, which is followed by another student who reiterates the same statement of being privileged to ask questions. The president responded to all these questions with a sense of agitation and started to express annoyance. While she did provide adequate answers that spoke to each question she did not hold back her opinions regarding the types of questions and also criticized the way the questions were asked. Some of her statements include: „not very academic, what was the question? Ah, you forgot? Inform yourself better. As your little classmate stated, Come on guys, we are in Harvard.“<sup>28</sup> She even joked about the inability of some students to clearly read questions from a piece of paper. While her reactions and side comments detract from the main goal of her talk, they do bolster her image as a charismatic and passionate leader whose discourse is highly inflected by melodramatic elements. CFK’s demeanor, inflection, and stance become very theatrical and performative.

## 5. Conclusion

The research presented here explores the reach of melodrama and populism as two communicational strategies that help in solidifying and extending political thought. Rather than being seen as two separate areas such as part of the cultural and political spheres, melodrama and its formulaic narrative of emotional excess intersect populist rhetoric. Through the public address by CFK at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy’s Forum, I established how her speech forms part of a performance to publicly display the possibilities of populism. Populism understood as a modality of politics to group and interpolate one group against another. As evinced in her talk, CFK parts from the theory of the *civilizing era*, as a moment in Argentinean history that demarcates two opposing groups. There is the group who has been marginalized and suffered the consequences of the *Lost Decade* due to neoliberal policies, and the group that embraces an unrestricted economy, as professed by developed nations. For CFK it is the former who must rise and take a leading role in society. Along with the speech, I interpreted the question and answer period as yet another moment when populism is performed. Both questions and answers between the president and the students present stage the contentions that pull apart notions of the *civilizing era*. That is, those opposed envision it only as a rhetorical strategy that hide ulterior motives, while those in favor see it as a reconsideration of those whose privilege had previously gone unquestioned. Nonetheless, what one finds present in both narratives is a striking call to the emotions and a passionate urgency to be heard.

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<sup>27</sup> Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s Public Address (Full Video). [Online] [2019-12-05]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9LY4qhXEXs&t=1224s>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

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