

## Book Review

– *In search of the lost decade. Everyday rights in post-dictatorship Argentina*,  
by Jennifer Adair, University of California Press, 2020

Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989) is famously remembered for his role in the transition to democracy after the brutal military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. Trials of the military personnel held accountable, and the Nunca Más report he initiated, meant an unprecedented break with the past. Images of the formerly all-powerful military men, forlornly sitting on their wooden benches opposite an indignant crowd, reverberated around the world. Alfonsín is almost exclusively remembered for these efforts to put human rights back on the agenda and to eliminate the vestiges of military rule. In this short book, Jennifer Adair focuses on another element of Alfonsín's presidency. She holds that the social and economic history of the decade after dictatorship has been unjustifiably neglected. The Argentine people not only wanted an end to military rule, it also demanded social reforms and food assistance from the new authorities. Adair stresses the importance of multiple protests about poverty and food shortage in the last years of the dictatorship. Although often overlooked, this popular unrest played a significant role, pressuring for the dictatorship's end, in the unexpected victory of Alfonsín in the October 1983 elections. The popular expectations of the Alfonsín regime were based on the president's threefold promise of human, social, and political rights. According to his hallmark phrase: "Con la democracia se come, con la democracia se educa, con la democracia se cura" (With democracy we eat, we get an education, and we get health care") (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bixoElb3ppQ>).

Adair tries to assess the meaning and results of this political project. Her conclusions are mixed. On the one hand, she shows that, especially in his first years, Alfonsín implemented a typically social-democratic programme. In response to the unmet basic needs of more than 20 percent of the population, his government created the Programa Alimentario Nacional (PAN) which represented an ambitious endeavour to eradicate hunger among Argentina's poor. At its height in 1986, it distributed 1.3 million food boxes per month. Up to 17 percent of the population was receiving food aid every month. PAN was not only about food distribution; it aimed at a greater awareness of Argentina's social

inequality among the middle classes, and a better integration of the poor into national life. The Programme depended on the enthusiasm of thousands of voluntary workers but also explicitly requested participation by the recipients. Receiving assistance implied attending workshops and educational activities, intending to strengthen social citizenship and ‘reconstruct family life’ among the poor. This classic social-democratic state paternalism was loudly criticized by the opposition, especially the Peronists who had surprisingly lost power in the 1983 elections, but the programme also reproduced earlier (mostly Peronist) programs of social assistance.

In the latter part of Alfonsín’s presidency, social programmes lost impetus. The press and popular sentiments soured and criticism increased. Debates around the so-called ‘Chernobyl chickens’ epitomised this new critical atmosphere. Early 1988 inflation hovered around 175 percent. Seeking answers to increasing prices and economic downturn, the Government took a more actively interventionist role. To counter the scarcity of meat, it ordered large imports of chickens from Eastern Europe. This enraged local meat and chicken producers but – more in general – offended Argentine meat-eating pride. Bad feelings erupted when a television reporter allegedly found piles of discarded, rotting chicken in Buenos Aires’ Ecological reserve. In subsequent debates, it was claimed that the imported chickens were infected by the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion. For several weeks, the scandal captivated national attention. This marked the end of the Government’s attempts to regulate the market. The violent food riots that erupted in early 1989 clearly demonstrated that Alfonsín had failed in his promise that, under his leadership, democracy would put an end to poverty and destitution.

Jennifer Adair’s book is a timely contribution to the analysis of Argentina’s post-dictatorship years. Although her claim of a lost decade seemed somewhat exaggerated, her focus on the social and economic elements of returning to democracy is necessary and convincing. The book presents a new analysis of the Alfonsín presidency and especially its social ambitions; in doing so, it also provides an alternative historical interpretation of the turbulent eighties, when restoring democracy went hand-in-hand with a haunting fear of the military’s resurgence. The case studies she presents clearly outline the multiple ambitions of the Alfonsín Government and the challenges it faced. In the end, it highlights the importance of interpreting this period socially and economically, which has mainly been studied regarding its political transformation.

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