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**Democratic Utopias:
The Argentine Transition to Democracy through Letters, 1983-1989**

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La correspondencia en sí misma ya es una forma de la utopía. Escribir una carta es enviar un mensaje al futuro; hablar desde el presente con un destinatario que no está ahí, del que no se sabe cómo ha de estar (en qué ánimo, con quién) mientras le escribimos y sobre todo, después: al leernos. La correspondencia es la forma utópica de la conversación porque anula el presente y hace del futuro el único lugar posible del diálogo.

-Ricardo Piglia

Introduction

On May 1, 1989, María, a high school teacher from Buenos Aires, wrote a letter to President Raúl Alfonsín as he embarked on his final months in office. The country was in the midst of a crisis of hyperinflation and elections were set for two weeks away. Earlier in the day, María heard the president’s last address to Congress and she felt compelled to write him. “My friend,” she began, as she recounted how she and her husband, an adjunct university instructor, worked hard over two decades of marriage, weathering continual financial difficulties and the sensation of “always having to start over.” María emphasized that she had no “political affiliations” that would cloud her judgment, lest the president think she was writing to ask for political favors. She recalled her happiness at casting her vote for Alfonsín in 1983 after seven years of military dictatorship. Though she did not regret the decision, she was barely able to mask her exasperation when she asked, “But why did you take away our hopes... why did you abandon us?” After mentioning her adolescent daughters, and her concerns about their desires to quit their studies and leave Argentina, she concluded her letter with a mix of resignation, and renewed appreciation, “So no matter, Mr. President, thank you, thank

you so much for helping me recover my dreams and hopes in 1983, and thank you for the democracy that allows me to live and to write you this letter, even though it does not allow for me to get sick.”ⁱ

María offers a personal glimpse into the lived experience of Argentina’s “transition to democracy.” Her letter narrates intimate details of personal and family history and embeds them as part of the broader social expectations that accompanied constitutional restoration. This article examines letters sent to the president during Argentina’s democratic transition, which corresponds roughly to the government of Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989). In October 1983, Alfonsín’s election heralded the return of democratic rule and the end of the nation’s most brutal period of military dictatorship (1976-1983), which resulted in up to 30,000 disappeared. Alfonsín was a leading member of the Radical Civic Union party (UCR). His election - the first many Argentines could remember not marred by violence or exclusion – not only signaled the return to democracy, it also marked the first electoral defeat of Peronism in 40 years. Over the course of the 1980s, thousands of Argentines saw the democratic opening as the opportunity to write unsolicited letters to the president, and their messages inspire re-evaluations of the history of Latin America’s democratic restorations.

Until recently, investigations of this period have been dominated by studies that analyze Latin America’s democratic transitions as guided by government elites, electoral politics, and military trials.ⁱⁱ The personal letters examined here take place in between the headlines of the most dramatic institutional moments. As such, they complicate the very notion of a “democratic transition” by grounding political transformation in the quotidian realms of family, neighborhood and market place, among others. Though writers filled

their letters with details of the changes that accompanied the end of military rule in Argentina, they did so in dialogue with past political frameworks and with an eye toward future uncertainties. Based on a close reading of approximately 5,000 letters to the president, one of the principal arguments of this article maintains that Latin America's democratic openings in the 1980s constituted a new phase of ongoing contests to define the contours of democracy and citizenship that dominated the course of the twentieth century.ⁱⁱⁱ

What compelled Argentines to write to the president? Who wrote? What did they hope to achieve? And what are the meanings of correspondence? These questions have guided investigations of the epistolary tradition in Latin America since the colonial period, which historians have mined toward understandings of popular culture, national sentiment, and government administration, among others.^{iv} Into the twentieth century, an era characterized by growing literacy rates, letter writing has been frequently analyzed as evidence of popular political participation. Sueann Caulfield relies on the correspondence of Rio de Janeiro's popular classes to argue for the centrality of concepts of honor and virtue in the making of modern Brazil.^v Joel Wolfe's investigation of letters to Getulio Vargas focuses on the critical role of the working class in the evolution of *Varguismo* and contested national imaginaries.^{vi} Wolfe's findings are echoed by Lauren Derby, whose analysis of newspaper denunciations frames letter writing as a democratic exercise that offered Dominicans ways to circumvent the authoritarianism of the Trujillo regime.^{vii} Building off of these interventions, this article analyzes public letter writing as political act, where the boundaries between supplicant and leader are blurred, and where the dynamics of citizenship and state-making are at their most vivid. It argues for the

ongoing importance of letter writing as a popular cultural and political practice that endured through the end of the twentieth century, a period that has received relatively little attention compared to earlier epistolary histories.^{viii} Over the course of the 1980s, correspondence positioned individuals as both participants in and architects of the new democracy. The messages reflect a prolonged moment of political change, distilled through personal life and emotion, which reveal the shifting social meanings of the transition to democracy itself.

In the case of contemporary Argentina, two instances of letter writing locate the petitions to Alfonsín within longer historical contests over rights and citizenship. Eva Perón received thousands of letters daily with requests for material assistance and financial support through her namesake foundation. In his classic study of the cultural life of Peronist Argentina, Mariano Plotkin argues that the letters brought citizens closer to an “easily accessible center of power.”^{ix} Sending a petition to the Eva Perón Foundation was the way to obtain gifts, material support, and inclusion into the robust welfare state of the day. More recently, Eduardo Elena’s examination of the public letter writing campaign, “Perón Wants to Know,” in the context of the second Five-Year Plan, illuminates popular engagement with Peronist discourse and the history of state planning.^x In both cases, the letters to Perón and Evita evidenced expanding notions of citizenship, and the re-definition of democracy along emancipatory and social lines by mid-century.^{xi}

With this history in mind, the correspondence to Alfonsín is not unique or unprecedented. The letters often evoke the language and forms associated with “clientelism,” with writers frequently intimating promises of their political support in exchange for material assistance.^{xii} Letter writers of the 1980s echoed the concerns of

petitioners past - from emotional pleas for employment and economic support, to commentary about the course of the nation. However, clientelism alone does not fully explain the letters to Alfonsín. In contrast to earlier archives of letters from the Peronist period, those of the 1980s reflect a changing social contract between the government and its citizenry, framed by the new political constraints of economic crisis and neoliberal policy. In Argentina, as with the rest of South America, the region's constitutional restorations also coincided with the worst fiscal crises since the 1930s. Beginning with Mexico's economic default in 1981-1982, the dawn of the new decade sparked economic changes experienced primarily in the form of social and economic emergency. And whereas in the wake of the 1930s crises Latin American governments adopted state-led welfare and development programs to ameliorate the impact of economic constriction, by the end of the twentieth century that approach was in full decline. Newly restored constitutional governments experimented with economic policies that eroded decades-old fiscal measures in favor of the gradual embrace of neoliberal structural readjustment.^{xiii} The tension at the heart of many of the letters to Alfonsín sees petitioners celebrating the democratic return while attempting to come to terms with a state much less materially equipped or able to respond to demands for welfare and redress.

Thus, while the letters to Raúl Alfonsín harken back to the frameworks of "populist" patronage forged during the Peronist period, there exist critical differences as well. Unlike the previously mentioned correspondence to Eva and Juan Perón, which can be examined as part of a particular institution or campaign, the letters to Alfonsín are, at times, more resistant to contextualized analysis. There was no official call to correspondence with the restoration of democracy, and the majority of letters never

received any response. Yet thousands of Argentines from across the country viewed the constitutional return as the chance to write the president with their advice, complaints and hopes for the new era.^{xiv} Argentines of all ages and walks of life wrote to the president. Alfonsín received letters from members of the middle and working class, from elites and impoverished individuals, and from political supporters and opponents alike. Despite their diffuse range of concerns and subject matter, the epistolary archive of the Argentine transition must be read as more than the observations of random, atomized individuals. The letters from the 1980s evidence the exuberance of renewed democratic participation. They also reveal the historical questions at stake during a period that saw both government officials and citizens grappling with the consequences of simultaneous political opportunity and economic uncertainty.^{xv} Though Alfonsín received letters from across Argentina, this article examines letters sent from Buenos Aires and the surrounding metropolitan suburbs. The findings are based on readings of approximately 800 letters from each year of the Alfonsín presidency (1983-1989). The correspondence analyzed here reflects the diversity of petitioners and their concerns, with attention paid to the ways that writers addressed the meaning of the democratic return in their lives.

The article first explores the democratic expectations of letter writers during the first two years of the Alfonsín presidency (1983-1985), a period of widespread support for the government. It then turns to an examination of the limits of national political openings through a discussion of concepts of rights and citizenship that emerge through the correspondence. Writers relied on familiar tropes of self-presentation and political posturing reminiscent of other correspondence to twentieth century leaders. However, the workers, house wives, business owners, and unemployed individuals, among others, who

wrote to Alfonsín often took pains to emphasize that they represented, above all, “apolitical,” “disinterested” citizens. In their letters, writers expressed a notion of citizenship rooted in the language of human rights, the legitimating principle of Argentina’s constitutional restoration. As citizens faced the realities of encroaching economic reorganization, they framed their rights claims in reference to earlier definitions of a democratic, benefactor state that was less viable as the decade proceeded. The last section examines the final months of the Alfonsín presidency and the ways that letter writers made explicit the vast undoing and refashioning of their democratic expectations by the end of decade.

Democratic Horizons

Following seven years of brutal military rule, which left behind a legacy of torture, disappearance, and economic turmoil, Argentines celebrated the return to democracy in 1983 with euphoric expressions of hope for an era of justice and peace. Christmas cards, photos, newspaper clippings, and hastily written messages scrawled on carbon paper began arriving at the government palace immediately following Raúl Alfonsín’s inauguration on December 10, 1983. In addition to congratulations and well wishes for the new president, authors acknowledged they were witnessing an age of new beginnings. Writers described in vivid detail the discussions they were having at home, work and school in the wake of the elections. Jorge, a 55-year old emergency room doctor, expressed the effervescence of the moment. “The hour of truth, justice, decency, and honesty has arrived,” he began:

Argentines are proud that a simple, human man full of great virtues will be able to rescue this sick Argentina from its stage four coma, as we say in medicine. You have already begun by stepping firm and I can assure you that from October 30 1983, until today I have shed many tears of joy. We have had great Radicals, H.

Yrigoyen, Alem, Balbín, Illía, and now you. What happiness for our beloved Argentina!^{xvi}

Jorge's letter touches on two critical details surrounding the end of military rule in Argentina. First, Alfonsín's election marked the end of fifty years of increasingly violent military takeovers that dominated political life since the 1930s. Second, the election of Alfonsín, a leading member of the Radical Party, represented the first electoral defeat of Peronism in its history. This was a shift that upended the logic of mainstream Argentine politics seemingly overnight at the onset of the new democratic era. Jorge's letter conveys a sense of historic renewal, with Alfonsín passing into the pantheon of national and UCR heroes.

The promise of 1983 did imply a decisive break with Argentina's political past. Yet, initial expectations for the Alfonsín government also took root in its self-conscious attempt to fulfill and reconcile the earlier "democratic transitions" surrounding the political movements of both Hipólito Yrigoyen and Juan Perón. Yrigoyen, the historic leader of the UCR, consolidated broader popular participation in politics at the beginning of the century. The Alfonsín government seized on the legacy of the UCR as Argentina's "oldest political party," and as the descendant of the nation's first democratic experiment to legitimize its own project for constitutional rule.^{xvii} At the same time, the Alfonsín government saw itself as a unifying force for the nation. It evoked Peronism's role in expanding the bounds of citizenship, and culled from its history of social and economic justice as key foundations for its own policies.^{xviii} In the wake of the savage violence of the military dictatorship, the administration's adoption of a human rights discourse sought to conceptually bind two of the nation's leading political traditions. The triple promise of political rights, physical safety, and social well-being resonated in a country

where many understood political terror and social deprivation to be bound up with one another.

Argentina's new democracy was forged amid the ruins of state terror, a legacy that encompassed not only the human rights abuses of the regime, but also a hobbled manufacturing economy, and sky-rocketing debt. At the start of 1984, the first full year of the Alfonsín presidency, the social and economic challenges were formidable, with estimates of 25% hunger in some major metropolitan centers,^{xix} and a startling annual consumer inflation rate of 688%, which would only increase by decade's end.^{xx} In their depictions of daily life, writers outlined a picture of a nation emerging from dictatorship. Petitioners often paired their optimism with an awareness of the challenges that lay ahead. A letter from Martha, a homemaker and mother of three, is emblematic of the growing difficulties described by many. After "much deliberation" she decided to write Alfonsín in the hopes that he could help her husband, Mario, recover his job. In 1979 he was fired from the refinery where he worked for almost a decade. Since then, she explained, her family had "experienced hard times, and we are still struggling." To make ends meet Mario sold veterinary supplies, driving "between 300 to 400 kilometers a day" in the family's "run-down, 1971 Renault 6." After car and housing payments, "everyday more expensive," the family was barely able to cover the costs of food. Pregnant with her fourth child, Martha explained that her baby gave her the courage to write Alfonsín to ask him to reverse the "injustice committed against [Mario]" and by extension her family. Though she knew Alfonsín "faced many challenges," she believed he could help, concluding, "sometimes you need to push miracles a little to make them happen."^{xxi}

Though “democracy” is not mentioned by name, the future that Martha envisioned echoed a broader expectation that the democratic era would, to paraphrase Alfonsín’s most famous campaign slogan, “heal, educate, and feed.”^{xxii} Writers put forward a panorama of need. Mothers wrote on behalf of sons to enlist them in apprenticeship programs; families implored the president’s help to pay bills and to schedule social worker visits; pensioners requested assistance to enroll in the government-sponsored housing program; and small-time entrepreneurs solicited loans to save their businesses, or to start them. These appeals may be typical of citizen petitions to leaders. In particular, they recall letters sent to the Eva Perón Foundation. However, read through the lens of restored constitutional government, the correspondence to Alfonsín takes on a specific meaning, one that connected the promise of the democratic era to ameliorating years of want through fortified public services and government outreach. A popular definition of democracy comes into focus through the correspondence, which combined political openings - enacted in letters through a personal relationship with the president - with a socially-grounded vision of rights, collective welfare, and individual prosperity.

While many petitioners wrote the president asking for material assistance, throughout the 1980s authors also wrote with a variety of proposals for what they believed Alfonsín must do to set Argentina on a new course. The volume of these letters indicates how seriously Argentines engaged with and sought participation in the course of democratic return. Proposals range from one-line missives - “To reactivate the economy do the opposite of what the IMF tells you!”^{xxiii} - to treatises on assembly line production in the northern province of Tucumán.^{xxiv} Proposals represent a rich genre of correspondence sent throughout the decade that is difficult to classify. However, over the course of

Alfonsín's first two years in office (1983-1985), the period of greatest support for the government, citizen proposals emphasized economic recovery. Enrique, a retiree from the outskirts of Greater Buenos Aires, designed intricate formulas for the sale of fiscal lands, a deposit scheme to pay off public debt, and fixed-term bonds to "end the constant flight of capital abroad."^{xxv} A man named Diego sent his sketches for a five-year plan to revive agricultural production, "without any additional cost to the state." He was so certain of his claims that he assured the president that if he came across as a bit "loco," he would be happy to send references to vouch for his credentials.^{xxvi} There were so many proposals of this sort that at one point in 1984, Alfonsín's long-time secretary, Margarita Ronco, drafted a form letter in response, thanking petitioners on behalf of the president and encouraging their ongoing support, "As [President Alfonsín] continues to face tremendous responsibilities, he will need the support of citizens like you who, with maturity and determination, secured the return of democracy."^{xxvii}

Economic recovery was on the minds of many in the early 1980s. When he took office, Alfonsín faced an unprecedented debt of \$43 billion, a direct result of the open market policies adopted by the military regime.^{xxviii} As many scholars have noted, by the late-1970s, inflation had been incorporated into the everyday "survival strategies" of Argentines in ways that altered consumption patterns and economic decision-making.^{xxix} Foreign debt, however, remained the purview of economists and technocrats until 1982 when the debt crisis sparked off in Mexico hastened the economic collapse of the military regime and thrust the issue into the public realm as never before. Throughout 1984, the comings and goings of Bernardo Grinspun, the administration's first Economic Minister,

and his epic negotiations with the IMF filled countless newspaper editorials and hours of evening talk shows.

In the fiscal realm, the Alfonsín administration's first economic team embraced a developmentalist agenda. Grinspun, the irascible minister, began his career as part of the Radical government of Arturo Illía (1963-1966), later forming part of Alfonsín's inner circle of trusted associates. The echo of mid-1960s fiscal policy formed the basis of the economic philosophy of administration's first year in office. As Grinspun described it, his top priority upon assuming his post was to "raise the factory curtains once again."^{xxx} The reactivation of the industrial economy, the restoration of real wages, and putting an end to unemployment aimed to reverse the economic policies of the dictatorship while modernizing the Argentine economy. Almost immediately, however, debt and the burden of inflation got in the way of those intentions.

For one, restructuring the debt and settling payments proved a dicey political issue. Alfonsín proclaimed repeatedly that only the "legitimate" debt would be paid, and he authorized a congressional committee to investigate the origins of national debt.^{xxxi} Any acceptance of the totality of debt would have signified compliance with the economic philosophy of the dictatorship. Combined with this idea, there was an implicit assumption on the part of the administration that officials at the IMF and the US Federal Reserve, which set global interest rates, would look favorably on Argentina as it democratized and emerged from its long night of violence.^{xxxii} Argentine officials encountered no such goodwill. Rumors circulated that Argentine debt would be classified as "problem loans," since the country had fallen behind on interest payments.^{xxxiii} Added to these perceptions of economic insolvency, Grinspun did not make a good impression on Argentina's

lenders. (In one infamous encounter, he was rumored to have dropped his pants during a meeting at the IMF.) Crippling interest rates led to requests for more loans by the end of 1984.^{xxxiv}

Letters regarding the foreign debt poured in. Along with the specter of inflation, debt was one more legacy of authoritarianism that threatened to eclipse the return of democracy. However, unlike media coverage of debt, which chronicled high-level meetings of state officials and international lending organizations, citizens cast the social impact of debt in a different light. On the one hand, authors emphasized the newness of debt as a national concern, the burden of which was not yet fully known. On the other hand, unlike inflation, which writers commented on as a force beyond personal control, debt seemed a concrete problem many believed could be easily undone. Hilarina, writing from her one-room apartment in the south of Buenos Aires, declared that she and her fellow compatriots would be willing to “donate a paycheck or a month’s rent” to help pay off the debt. In this way, she concluded, “...We would feel what it really means to be Argentine. And we would fulfill our duty to the nation, just like Remedios de Escalada de San Martín!”^{xxxv} Patriotic fervor imbues many letters, and writers frequently signaled their participation in a project of nation re-building.

Schemes, proposals, and big ideas overwhelmed the early correspondence to the president. Many writers sensed this and acknowledged that their letters may be headed for bureaucratic oblivion, often commenting along the lines of, “I know this will probably never reach you.” Indeed, the vast majority of letters never reached Alfonsín and most did not receive a response, though all were stamped with a date of entry, assigned a file number, and, depending on their content, summarized by secretaries and sent on to the

corresponding national, provincial or municipal agency. The epistolary trail often ended there. One of the few letters to receive a personal response from the office of the president was from Gummi Industries, a car parts manufacturer, informing the president that the workers, “by spontaneous decision,” had pledged one day’s salary toward debt repayment. In addition, the letter continued, the company would donate an unstipulated amount every month “for as long as the country needed it.” Attached was a check for 71,788 pesos made out to the Ministry of Economy for “Debt Payment.” The workers justified their contribution, “[as] consequence of the spiritual state of the nation, unprecedented in the political history of our country and not seen since the days of National Organization.” In response, the president’s brother and personal secretary, Guillermo, thanked the workers and acknowledged the president was “deeply moved” by their gracious gesture.^{xxxvi} The letter arrived at the presidential offices in May 1984. By then, Alfonsín may certainly have been moved as labor relations were irrevocably strained following the failure of a government-sponsored union reform law and escalating labor unrest, which would result in 13 general strikes by the end of Alfonsín’s term.^{xxxvii} The Gummi letter also reflects a broader sentiment at the onset of the Alfonsín presidency when national debt, which became so commonplace a burden on governability over the next two decades, was initially regarded as somehow manageable and disentangled from other realms of institutional life. “Pay and it will be resolved,” the letters seem to suggest. References to independence and nation formation cast debt as imposed from the outside, an external constraint, which unlike the internally polarizing military trials or labor reforms could unite disparate camps in common cause.

The return of democracy in 1983 represented a historic national turning point. Letter writers took seriously the promise of the new era and filled their messages with hopeful designs for the future. Citizen letters sent during the first two years following the return to democracy reflect understandings of a symbiotic relationship between political openings and economic recovery. In their messages of counsel and appeal, these early messages recall one of the founding principles of the return of constitutional government, which positioned democratic rule as the complete antithesis of Argentina's authoritarian past. From the onset of the campaign, Alfonsín and his advisors presented democracy as the salve and panacea for the economic and political woes of military rule. They argued that if Argentina's economic and moral decline were the direct consequences of authoritarianism, it followed that political democracy would forge a new "social pact" to restore both financial and social stability.^{xxxviii} While the dichotomy between dictatorship and democracy originated in broader theories of Latin American democratic transitions, it resonated throughout Argentine public life, and had great implications for overall perceptions of the Alfonsín government, especially when it became clear that democratic restoration alone could not reverse all of the nation's fiscal woes. At the beginning of the administration, however, the tension between two seemingly antithetical political forms sustained widespread hope for the democratic horizons ahead.

The Limits of Political Openings

Between late 1983 and early 1986, overall public approval granted the Alfonsín administration a wide margin for containing cleavages.^{xxxix} The UCR soundly won in mid-term legislative elections in 1985, signaling confidence in the trajectory of the government. Yet, there were noticeable cracks in the democratic euphoria, especially in

the fiscal realm. By April 1985, Alfonsín outlined a new approach to the economy, which prioritized reducing the fiscal deficit through cutbacks in public spending, the privatization of select state enterprises, and inflation controls.^{x1} Important changes emerged in the ways that individuals thought about the prospects for the democratic future and their place in it. Despite optimism for the future, letter writers frequently highlighted the limited impact of national political openings on their lives. For many, the democratic return did not usher in the material changes that had fueled their expectations in 1983.

Petitioners often expressed their grievances in the form of complaint, a broad epistolary genre that spanned the decade, and that highlighted overlapping concerns about state services and the shifting economy. In 1987, a man named Eugenio seethed to the president as he recalled his quest to install and repair his home phone line. His letter included a dossier of bureaucratic travails, attempts to contact the state phone company, politicians, even the federal police. “How can it be,” he fumed, “that in full democracy NOBODY has responded to or even acknowledged receipt of my request!”^{xli} A similar letter from Velia describes her attempts to contact the municipal authorities, though under more tragic circumstances. Her 77-year old father had recently been killed during a hit-and-run accident as he crossed a busy intersection in Buenos Aires. After her letters to city officials had gone unanswered, she decided to write to Alfonsín. “I am an Argentine citizen who awaited the triumph of democracy with much excitement,” she begins. “Thanks to Ex-Intendant Cacciatore,” the military mayor of Buenos Aires most notorious for razing entire neighborhoods and expelling thousands of residents to make way for a massive highway system, her street had become a “death trap,” with car races day and

night and drivers using the zone as a freeway. With an elementary school located nearby and no synchronized traffic lights, Velia feared another accident. Her petition campaign to make the intersection safer fell upon deaf ears and in her mourning she endured a further setback as the woman who hit her father turned out to be the girlfriend of a police captain. Frustrated, she pleaded with the president to intervene locally, signing her letter, “*JUSTICIA!*”^{xlii}

Velia is one of the few authors to allude to the policies of the military regime. For the most part writers did not cite recent history, though many of their grievances could be traced back to the deregulations set in motion during the dictatorship. Instead, blame for current injustices resided in the immediate present, in the institutions and public offices that citizens interacted with on a municipal and neighborhood level everyday. Jorge and Velia employ “democracy” as a rhetorical flourish to bolster their claims and to ground them in the moral language of the day. In doing so, they and many others may have believed their petitions would be taken more seriously. It is impossible to say with certainty if writers only appealed to “democracy” because they thought that was what government leaders wanted to hear. Even allowing for that possibility, the urgency running through much of the correspondence reveals the ways that writers connected the democratic return to improving the material conditions of their daily lives. Concretely, democracy meant fixing traffic lights, installing phone lines, filling potholes, reopening factories in the industrial belt surrounding Buenos Aires, and fortifying sewage systems and water supplies. These were the tasks imposed by writers on the Alfonsín government and what it was ultimately judged upon.

The realms of daily life emerged as key battlegrounds of democratic restoration.

While many writers presented their demands as novel obstacles confronting the government, citizen concerns were also rooted in the memory of democratic traditions forged over the course of previous decades. As Natalia Milanesio and Eduardo Elena have demonstrated, state policies attuned to consumption and public service first grounded democratic values and citizenship in the local and private sphere during the Peronist era (1945-1955).^{xliii} Despite opposition to Peronism itself, and the increasingly violent attempts by the armed forces to constrain political life, the social imprint of this period endured and influenced the democratic futures that citizens imagined for the rest of the century. The letters to Alfonsín concerning state services and infrastructure call to mind the letters sent to Juan Perón during the “Peron Wants to Know Campaign.” As with the correspondence to Perón, in which citizens wrote in with their designs for the second Five-Year Plan, the letters to Alfonsín not only positioned individuals as direct participants in a national political project, but they also identified the state as the legitimate entity to secure citizen well-being. Writers during the 1980s did not generally frame their correspondence as explicit dialogues with the past, however, the ideal democratic government that emerged through their letters can be traced back to the mid-century expansion of an interventionist, benefactor state.

An increased frustration in the letters to Alfonsín stems, in part, from a growing awareness of new limits on the state during the 1980s. Throughout the decade, streamlining the state hovered in public debate as one route to achieve fiscal solvency, keep inflation in check, and reduce the public deficit.^{xliv} Writers may have agreed on the need for state reforms, however, no clear consensus emerged regarding how that should occur. To return to letters of complaint, petitioners paint a picture of a highly

dysfunctional public sector in the midst of economic tailspin. The long lines in government offices, paper work, and recalcitrant officials, main tropes of the Argentine bureaucracy, were precisely what writers expected democracy to reverse. Yet, the correspondence illustrates a state that was at once omnipresent, yet inaccessible; demanding, yet unaccountable; interventionist, yet ineffective. Some authors advocated privatization and outright dollarization of the economy. For many others the state remained a source of jobs and security. From 1983-1989, thousands of employment requests were remitted to ENTEL, the state phone company, and SEGBA, the utility company of Greater Buenos Aires. Nor did letters break down easily along class lines, with the upper-middle classes embracing structural readjustment, and lower income sectors holding fast to the institutions and policies of the Peronist era. These ideas could exist together in seemingly contradictory ways.

A letter from Roberto, a father of four in Quilmes, a declining industrial town located on the southern outskirts of Buenos Aires, exemplifies how citizens' engagement with the state was in flux during this period. Roberto advocated *achicamiento del estado* (shrinking the state) as the solution to Argentina's economic difficulties, a surprising proposal given that several paragraphs into his letter he introduces himself as a municipal worker. "I have given 30 of the best years of my life to the public sector," he declares, not without a touch of pride. Several features of Roberto's letter deserve mention: For one, Roberto's use of the phrase *achicar el estado* echoes the dictatorship-era economy minister, José Martínez de Hoz, who infamously proclaimed that his policies would shrink the state in order to *agrandar la nación* ("shrink the state to enlarge the nation"). In one sense, Roberto was in line with mainstream center-right economists and

commentators of the day, including many members of the Alfonsín government. Yet, his solution to “shrink the state,” far from purging the public sector, was special government-sponsored unemployment insurance and job-training programs to reposition municipal employees for work in state industries or the private sector. Roberto’s letter hints at a moment during the 1980s when associations of privatization were still somewhat up for grabs, when “shrinking” could imply reform and the maintenance of the state as benefactor and prime employer, not long before the massive application of neoliberal structural adjustment in the 1990s. Roberto concludes his three-page letter with a thoughtful commentary, connecting the declining industrial economy of Quilmes to Argentina’s position in the global economy: “I ask myself what our role will be in the future if our industry is practically destroyed and we are not in any condition to compete with Japan, Germany, the USA, etc. etc.”^{xlv}

Like many writers, Roberto acknowledges Argentina’s diminished economic position and the realities of the crumbling manufacturing economy. Authors continually alluded to the fact that the dawn of the democratic era coincided with a massive shift in national economic logics and identity, and they grappled with the interplay between internal and external constraints. A young man named Jorge wrote with a dilemma on December 10, 1984, the administration’s one-year anniversary. At twenty-three, he recently received his accounting certificate and hoped to marry and buy a house with his fiancé. “Like so many,” he lamented, “we are unable to save money.” Though they hesitated to write given “all of the problems facing the country,” the young couple sought the president’s counsel:

...[O]ur concern is this: our friends and acquaintances (people who call themselves honest!) advise us to invest in Dollars. We think this is detrimental to national

interests, despite the benefits it could give us, and we systematically refuse to speculate with this kind of ‘investment.’ I would like to know your response as the representative of national popular interests.^{xlvi}

Upon first reading, Jorge’s letter recalls national debt letters, acknowledging the interconnectedness of individual action and national economic well-being. But Jorge departs from the more positive implications of workers’ donations and debt repayment. While debt may be imposed from outside, Jorge signals two internal threats: dollars and the “dishonest” citizens with the will to use them. More critically, the letter highlights a presumed incompatibility between “national popular” versus individual interests. Through policies of trade liberalization and repression, the military regime may have weakened the frameworks of state-led welfare and development – two corner stones of what for decades constituted the national popular - however, the social recognition and articulation of that shift coincided directly with the return of constitutional government. Writers often expressed their dismay at the radical separation of national economic sovereignty from their individual security. “I did not speculate and look where it got me!” exclaimed an irate small business owner as he recounted the rise and fall of his furniture factory and subsequent bankruptcy.^{xlvii} Part of the Alfonsín government’s mandate was to recuperate, recalibrate, and redefine the meanings of the “national popular.” Throughout the 1980s, individuals struggled with their own definitions and repositioned themselves within altered political and economic landscapes. They did so as individuals and as citizens of a body politic. As the Alfonsín years wore on, however, the perceived antagonism of these spheres—between civic versus private identities—became more rigid, to the extent that for many writers any hope for achieving a greater good would come at the expense of personal well-being, and vice versa.

Citizenship and Human Rights

Though one of the enduring legacies of the Argentine transition to democracy is human rights policy and the efforts to end the impunity of the armed forces - from the much lauded *Nunca Más* report, to the groundbreaking trials against the military regime, to the equally criticized limitations on legal proceedings - these events are strikingly absent in the correspondence to Alfonsín.^{xlviii} While the president did receive letters and telegrams following military uprisings, and messages of moral outrage following the passage of laws to put an end to military trials, the overall epistolary silence is deafening compared to scholarly attention to the imprint of these events during the Alfonsín presidency and beyond. One important qualification is necessary on this point: With respect to human rights, individuals could mediate their concerns through activist networks and institutions, to the extent that a letter to Alfonsín was an unlikely, comparatively ineffectual, venue of protest or support. Petitioners often highlighted their inclusion as part of the “unaffiliated” masses, a status that not only justified unmediated contact with the president, but also distilled petitions to a pure state of need, opinion, or praise, seemingly impervious to outside political or ideological influences. This is not to argue that human rights were not a social concern of “ordinary” Argentines during the 1980s. On the contrary, the letters demonstrate a multivalent notion of human rights, transformed into ideals along the lines of Velia’s call for “Justice!” following the death of her father. Taken as a whole, letter writers articulated a definition of citizenship grounded in a holistic notion of human rights, which afforded all Argentines guarantees of material and physical security.

Rights language penetrated social life, and was refitted to highly charged conceptions of home and national belonging, among others. The tensions between personal prosperity and democratic futures emerge forcefully in letters from individuals contemplating emigration or recently returned from abroad. Educated professionals with the training and means to look for work overseas began sending their descriptions of the difficult decision to leave Argentina as early as February 1984, two months into the administration. Susana was a young newlywed when she left Argentina in the early 1970s, “facing economic impossibility, and the uncertainty of those days, never knowing where another bomb was going to go off.” Following several years in Venezuela and the United States, she and her family settled in Italy before returning to Argentina following Alfonsín’s election, happy at the prospect to “do something for the country.” Shortly after her return, however, she wrote of her difficulties of finding a job, lamenting that, “little by little, we have begun to look abroad again...and I believe there are many of us in the same situation.”^{xlix}

Susana acknowledges membership in a wider community originally forced abroad due to a combination of political violence and lack of opportunity. While the risk of “bombs going off” may have dissipated, Susana sees that threat as having been replaced by equally destabilizing economic forces conspiring to push her and her family out again. Silvia, a 34-year old architect, wrote Alfonsín upon her return from six years in Italy with a similarly blunt assessment: “Mr. President, I have heard you say that the political exiles can come back with guarantees of work, security, and stability, but what about the economic exiles?”¹ Susana and Silvia’s reference to violence and exile, a highly charged term with its connotations of state terror and victimization, is striking. In their

appropriation of the language of human rights, they identify themselves as casualties of the dictatorship and therefore entitled to guarantees of justice and redress.

Citizens framed demands for economic justice and social well-being as human rights at the heart of the democratic restoration. At the same time, the language of human rights afforded individuals new ways to talk about and assert much older struggles. Rights claims were particularly evident in messages from citizens outside of the middle class, who wrote of their on-going fight against poverty. In 1986, Marta, a single mother of three, wrote of her six-year attempt to fight eviction and secure housing for her family in Córdoba and Buenos Aires. Towards the middle of her letter, she plainly declares, “I believe that if your heart has feeling enough to bring back all of the exiles, then you could also save us from the exile we were sent into by human insensibility. That would give us the chance to believe that Justice really does exist.”^{li} Marta described her own internal exile—an endless saga of cancelled social worker visits and unscrupulous landlords—severed from the institutions meant to help her. That sentiment is echoed in a hastily written message from Zulema. Writing from “the entrance to the Tribunales court” in the center of Buenos Aires, where she was attempting to contest an eviction notice, the urgency of Zulema’s letter is palpable: “Please, please we need 90, 60, even 30 days to find a new place to live.” As she explained, the letter was her last-ditch effort to help her family: “Mr. President, I am turning to you because I know that you are a very Humane person, and that this is a Human Right...Now that we live in democracy, how can our children live in the streets.”^{lii} Human rights redefined citizenship during the 1980s, placing in greater relief the injustices against which the new democracy was measured. Yet individuals directed their demands for the human right to a home, food, and

employment, among others, to a state that was increasingly unable to follow through on the original promises of the democratic era.

Remaking Democratic Expectations

By 1987, the Alfonsín administration was embattled. The early gains of the *Plan Austral*, the economic plan instituted in 1985, which dramatically reduced inflation, began to falter. As the price freezes originally implemented by the plan were gradually lifted, inflation rose in steady ascent, cresting at 175% by the end of the year, more than double the rate in 1986. Then during Holy Week, the *carapintadas*, military officers threatened by the ongoing prosecution of the armed forces, made their debut in a dramatic takeover of the Campo de Mayo military base. Though the tense four-day standoff ended peacefully, Alfonsín quickly came under fire following the passage of the Due Obedience law, which absolved many lower-ranking officials from trial. The turbulent year culminated politically in the midterm elections of September 6, 1987, which swept the Peronist party into congressional control and into the governorship of key provinces, Buenos Aires included. Following Peronism's first-ever electoral defeat in the 1983 presidential elections, the party entered a period of dramatic flux and began a steady transformation from its traditional union base into to a locally-based "party of the poor."^{liii} The 1987 electoral victory marked the movement's resurgence and its incipient overhaul.

In the wake of the mid-term elections, the Peronist win emerged as a turning point with significant implications for the UCR government. Letters sent by self-proclaimed Alfonsín supporters and Radical party members emphasized negative depictions of Peronism, imbued with contrasts of "corrupt" Peronists versus the stately and inherently

“democratic” Radical party. For example, a woman named Norma wrote a brief letter, in which she concluded, “as we all know, the Peronists are people of bad character (*mala calaña*).”^{liv} Others, like Elsa, framed the Peronist resurgence as proof of “a lack of civic maturity.”^{lv} Yet, even the president’s most sympathetic admirers characterized the Peronist win in terms of a UCR failure in the economic sphere. Fiscal recovery, combined with an ambitious social agenda, was part of the administration’s mandate from the beginning. The September 1987 elections reflected an overall perception that the administration was falling short on both fronts. Pedro, a life-long Radical, sent his detailed analysis of the election results, including a vehement critique of internal UCR structures and tensions among party leaders. While these factors impacted the election results, Pedro believed the UCR loss was rooted more in “the gap between our basic needs (*canasta familiar*) and our salaries.” “Mr. President,” he reasoned, “you know that the flood of votes that went to Peronism was based in daily life (*pasa por lo cotidiano*).”^{lvi}

Another message from a pensioner named Eduardo reflected the ire of one sector of the popular classes that had originally supported Alfonsín. Writing from the southern belt of Greater Buenos Aires, a region that experienced a wave of factory closings and capital flight throughout the 1980s, Eduardo blamed Alfonsín for abandoning the working class. As proof, he enclosed a series of articles from local newspapers chronicling the plight of pensioners from his area, including a graphic photo of an elderly man who starved to death alone in his house. The photo’s caption read, “Hunger: The Cruellest Battle!” Eduardo feared the same fate and vehemently analyzed the downturn of popular support for the government:

You have forgotten about the workers and the pensioners! We are hungry! And that is the reason why we changed our position in the last election. We cast our *VOTO CASTIGO* against the policies of your government, especially ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL policies.^{lvii}

Despite their contrasts in tone, Pedro and Eduardo's letters echo shared opinions of government shortcomings and dashed hopes. Their messages, and others like them, are also signposts of the ultimate demise of the Alfonsín government's initial attempt to reconcile the "liberal republic" and the "popular republic," which took root in the democratic traditions of Yrigoyen and Perón. In the year and a half that remained of the Alfonsín administration, economic recovery would become the principle benchmark for measuring democratic solvency. Indeed, in the wake of the events of 1987, writers seemed to abandon the notion that the government could implement the social change that fueled the hopes at the onset of the administration. As daily life became more expensive and as inflation rose, many argued that the future of the Alfonsín government depended solely on fiscal recovery, and in their letters, economic stabilization tended to be equated with democracy itself.

As voters began to set their sites on the 1989 presidential elections, the year began with a turbulent and bloody start. In late January, 70 members of the armed group *Movimiento Todos Por la Patria* (MTP) stormed the *La Tablada* barracks on the outskirts of Buenos Aires amid growing rumors of another military uprising. By the time the bloody confrontation ended the following day, 29 MTP members were dead and 13 more were in custody.^{lviii} Not two weeks after La Tablada, the government's most recent economic stabilization plan collapsed following the World Bank's decision to cut off promised credits to Argentina. The Bank's announcement sparked a prolonged bout of hyperinflation that did not let up fully until July. Between January and May 1989, the

price of basic food goods rose, in some cases, up to 1000%.^{lix} In late March, the governor of Buenos Aires declared the province in a state of emergency. He sent an urgent telegram to Alfonsín to authorize the distribution of emergency food subsidies “in order to avoid the coming social chaos.”^{lx} By the end of the year, inflation would reach 4,923.6%.^{lxi}

Alfonsín addressed the opening session of congress for the last time as president on May 1, 1989. As the economy continued its downward spiral, it seemed certain that Carlos Menem would easily beat the UCR candidate and governor of Córdoba, Eduardo Angeloz. From the congressional pulpit, Alfonsín could not ignore this fact, or the social havoc wrought by months of hyperinflation. Recalling the milestones and setbacks of his presidency, Alfonsín emphasized that his greatest accomplishment was perhaps his very presence in congress that day - no small feat, given that he was poised to transfer constitutional power to a democratically elected president for the first time in five decades. He concluded his speech stating, “We have been so successful that the country seems to have forgotten what our main concern was in 1983. Today it seems natural that a government is able to fulfill its constitutional mandate.”^{lxii}

Letters flooded the presidential palace in the wake of the address. Echoing Alfonsín’s assertion, writers commented on the ways that political democracy had indeed achieved a “commonplace” or “natural” status in their lives. However, that certainty came at the expense of a radical redefinition of their expectations of just six years earlier. One of the letters sent to Alfonsín during his final months in office was from María Luisa, who for the past six years had often been “tempted to write of the incredible hopes that I had for my country, my compatriots, and for my children.” Though María Luisa wrote with pride

that her children now lived in a “free country,” her letter concluded with a bittersweet assessment: “But the years went by, and though I still think and believe that this is the best system of government, we have reached a desperate situation, Mr. President. How can you live if you can not buy the necessities of life?”^{lxiii}

While María Luisa’s doubts coincided with esteem for Alfonsín, other individuals were less sympathetic. Lucia wrote from Lomas de Zamora, from the south of Buenos Aires, shortly after the May 14 elections, in which Menem soundly defeated the Radical Party candidate, Angeloz, with close to 48% of the vote. Though Lucia was certain that “[democracy] was the best political system, our situation has become intolerable.” Her descriptions vividly capture the impact of economic crisis in Greater Buenos Aires, from the empty shelves in her local supermarket, to the rising cost of medicines—“when they are available”—to the suspension of her mother’s pension, to the general deterioration of her town center. As she looked around at her present surroundings, she blamed public officials for the crisis and degradation of her town: “...every day we hear talk about public spending! So let’s put public officials to work! Repairs, cleanups, just stop throwing money away!”^{lxiv}

Both Lucia and María Luisa recognize political democracy as a basic fact of their present reality. Yet in taking stock of their lives over the past six years—María Luisa in resignation, Lucia in anger—the women had let go of a belief that their material well-being could and would be safeguarded by the same democratic government that was able to secure them other political freedoms. Read together, their letters lay bare the great transformation of democratic expectations from 1983 on. At the start of the Alfonsín administration, the main tenets of liberal democracy and human rights were melded with

a firm commitment to social justice and economic redistribution. Though not without its tensions and cracks, that vision encompassed both the hopes of letter writers and the promise of newly restored constitutional government. Endemic economic crisis and disenchantment with government policy, followed by the upheaval of hyperinflation, ultimately decoupled or unhinged the constituent parts of an inclusive and ambitious democratic agenda. Together, Lucia and María Luisa highlight the uncomfortable distance between political democracy and social rights by May 1989 in the midst of economic tailspin. That did not mean, however, that the aim of social justice disappeared. On the contrary, social demands became even more acute and letter writers placed in relief faltering welfare programs and a state ill-equipped and unwilling, in their eyes, to address growing critical need.

Lucia wrote her letter on May 29, 1989. The next day she may have awoken to news that in the neighboring town of Quilmes supermarkets were being ransacked by “roving bands” of looters - alternately identified by the local newspaper, *El Sol*, as mothers trying to feed their hungry children, or leftist agitators - holding defenseless owners hostage and emptying store shelves in the process.^{lxv} For the past five days, similar reports had been pouring in from the outskirts of Rosario, Córdoba, and other parts of Greater Buenos Aires, accompanied by rumors of escalating street violence, food shortages, and supermarkets in flames, which placed entire communities on edge. In response to the social unrest, Alfonsín declared a state of siege for 30 days. The lootings, which were most widespread in Rosario, resulted in fifteen deaths over the course of nine days. In light of the chaos and an economic situation that had become untenable, Alfonsín, who

for several days had firmly denied reports that he would step down, ultimately announced his decision to transfer power to Carlos Menem five months earlier than anticipated.^{lxvi}

One of the letters written to the president during his final days in office was from Graciela, a teacher in Greater Buenos Aires, who perhaps best expressed the arc of the Alfonsín years, “I agree when people say, because it hits close to home, that ‘liberty won’t feed you.’ But freedom still tastes pretty good.” As Graciela wrote “from her kitchen table before heading off to class” in late May 1989, she weaved her personal history and her hopes and desires for Argentina with a forceful and prescient glimpse toward the nation’s future: “...I would prefer to not wake up every morning to hear about rising prices, the exchange rate, and shortages. I want economic stability, security, and national progress, but I don’t want to achieve that by paying the social costs of those great powers people consider ‘Promised Lands’...I want PEACE above all, in all its significance.”^{lxvii}

Conclusion

This article traced the restoration of constitutional government in Argentina as it emerged through personal letters to Raúl Alfonsín. As writers inscribed themselves as part of a new national project, they tested revived public languages of democracy, human rights, and justice while laying bare the growing distance between their expectations and their daily lives. Military trials and labor reforms have received the most attention as the source of greatest achievement and chaos over the course of six dramatic years, during which the survival of the Alfonsín government was in doubt more than once, beset by thirteen general strikes, armed insurrections, and bitter reversals of justice. The letters to Alfonsín are embedded in these events, but they were often not at the center of writers’

immediate concerns as they sat down to type or fire off a hand written message. In the midst of overlapping political openings and economic retreats, Argentines' hopes for constitutional restoration were doubly rooted in calls for justice following the end of a brutal period of military repression, and in the promises of state-led welfare, originally forged at mid-century. The main historical reference point for letters writers was not necessarily the immediate authoritarian past, but rather the memory of the benefactor state, which emerged during the Peronist period. Despite the violence of military rule, which attempted to undo the foundations of state-led welfare, the legacy of previous democratic struggles remained intact and formed the basis of social expectations for the transition to democracy.

The letters to Alfonsín inspire new interpretations of Latin America's constitutional restorations by grounding letter writers' concerns in much longer contests over the meanings of democracy of citizenship that marked the twentieth century. During the 1980s, human rights redefined citizenship. Writers framed their demands as human rights for social well-being, which they attached to claims for home, employment, food, and national belonging, among others. Through their messages to the president, citizens expressed the ways that the constituent parts of an initial, holistic definition of democracy came undone through years of economic crisis, military unrest, and growing social inequality. Letters writers gradually relinquished their beliefs in a state that could guarantee both political rights and their material well-being. Though the transition was heralded as a break with Argentina's past, writers also struggled to make sense of the continuities, and the extent to which 1983 signaled the end of, mere interlude to, or radical redefinition of, entrenched cultural conflicts. The letters to Raúl Alfonsín narrate a

history of diminished hopes, and the narrowing of possibilities over the decade. Yet the popular record of the social life of Argentina's democratic transition also restores a sense of process and specificity to political debates of the 1980s, and the multiple attempts to reconcile a historical tradition of Latin American social rights with the coming post-Cold War and neoliberal age.

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ⁱ The letters on which this article is based are housed in the Archivo General de la Nación/Departamento Archivo Intermedio (AGN/DAI), Fondo Documental "Presidencia de la Nación. Secretaria Privada (1983-1989)." I have omitted the last names of letter writers to protect their identities. Though Raúl Alfonsín received letters from all over the country, the letters analyzed in this article were sent from Buenos Aires and the surrounding suburbs. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 273-152.850.

ⁱⁱ For the purposes of this article, the period of democratic restoration in South America refers specifically to the return of democratic governments in Argentina (1983), Brazil (1985), Uruguay (1985), Paraguay (1989), and Chile (1990). Classic works on democratic transitions in South America include: *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, a five-volume Woodrow Wilson Center series edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, published in 1986. See as well: Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transitions and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); and Guillermo O'Donnell, *Counterpoints: Selected Essays on Authoritarianism and Democratization* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999). More than analyses of Southern Cone political transformations, these studies, formulated throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s by many of Latin America, Europe, and the United States' leading political scientists, constituted "guide posts" for the direction of political change. Intellectual production from within the social sciences—in particular sociology and political science—represents an integral part of the history of the era. For an investigation of the historical role of this literature, the political scientist Cecilia Lesgart has reconstructed the "idea" of the democratic transition. She follows a group of Chilean and Argentine social scientists and intellectuals and examines how their formulations came to occupy a central role throughout the 1980s, *Usos de la transición a la democracia: Ensayo, ciencia y política en la década del '80* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Homo Sapiens, 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ For a brief overview of works that frame the history of twentieth century Latin America as a struggle over the definition of citizenship and democracy, see in particular: Ian Roxborough, "Unity and Diversity in Latin American History," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 16:1 (May, 1984) pp. 1-26; Daniel James, "Uncertain Legitimacy: The Social and Political Restraints Underlying the Emergence of Democracy in

Argentina, 1890-1930,” in George Reid Andrews and Herrick Chapman, eds. *The Social Construction of Democracy, 1870-1990* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Steve Stern, “Between Tragedy and Promise: The Politics of Writing Latin American History in the Late Twentieth Century,” in Gilbert M. Joseph, ed. *Reclaiming the Political in Latin American History: Essays from the North* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); and Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Second Edition, 2011).

^{iv} Specific studies on the history and practice of letter writing have largely focused on the colonial period up through the nineteenth century. See, for example: John Lockhart and Enrique Otte, *Letters and People of the Spanish Indies, Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); and John Lockhart’s essay, “Letters and People to Spain,” in his *Of Things of the Indies: Essays Old and New In Early Latin American History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 81-97. More recently, Kathryn Burns has looked at the politics of writing in *Into the Archive: Writing and Power in Colonial Peru* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). For the nineteenth century, scholars have examined letter writing as an integral part of nation building. Key works in this regard include: Angel Rama, *The Lettered City*, Translated and Edited by John Chasteen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Sarah Chambers, “Letters and Salons: Women Reading and Writing the Nation in the Nineteenth Century,” in Sarah Castro-Klarén and John Chasteen, eds. *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003) 54-83; and William French, “‘Cartas y cartas, compadre...’ Love and Other Letters from Río Frío,” in William H. Beezley and Linda Ann Curcio, eds. *Latin American Popular Culture Since Independence, 2nd Edition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012) 68-84.

^v Sueann Caulfield, *In Defense of Honor: Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

^{vi} Joel Wolfe, “Father of the Poor or Mother of the Rich? Getulio Vargas, Industrial Workers, and Constructions of Class, Gender, and Populism in São Paulo, 1930–1954,” *Radical History Review*, 58 (Winter 1994), pp. 80–111. See as well Brodwyn Fisher’s examination of letters to Vargas in, *A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

^{vii} Lauren Derby, “In the Shadow of the State: The Politics of Denunciation and Panegyric During the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1940-1958,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 83:2 (May, 2003), pp. 295-344.

^{viii} For a notable exception see Adolfo Gilly and Rhina Roux, eds. *Cartas a Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas* (Mexico City: Colección Problemas de México, Ediciones Era, 1989).

^{ix} Mariano Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón’s Argentina* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1993), p.158.

^x Eduardo Elena, “What the People Want: State Planning and Political Participation in Peronist Argentina,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 37:1 (Feb., 2005) pp. 81–108. Omar Acha has also investigated the letters to Perón as evidence of the creation of distinctly new political society. Omar Acha, “Sociedad civil y sociedad política durante el primer peronismo,” *Desarrollo Económico*, Vol. 44, No. 174 (Jul.-Sept. 2004), pp. 199-230.

^{xi} Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine working class, 1946-1976* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Jeff Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

^{xii} My discussion of clientelism is informed by Javier Auyero’s ground-breaking ethnographic study of patron-client networks in the shantytowns of Buenos Aires. In contrast to studies that emphasize the negative aspects of clientelism, Auyero examines the historical and sociological roots of clientelism as a series of “informal problem-solving networks” that helps residents mitigate extreme forms of poverty and exclusion. Javier Auyero, *Poor People’s Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

^{xiii} For a comparative look at the political economy of Latin America during the mid-1980s, see Albert O. Hirschman, “The Political Economy of Latin American Development: Seven Exercises in Retrospection,” *Latin American Research Review* 22:3 (1987), pp. 7-36.

^{xiv} The exact number of letters sent to Alfonsín over the course of his presidency is unknown, and because there has been no official attempt to systematize the correspondence, it is difficult to speak of a representative sample. While Alfonsín received thousands of letters over the course of his presidency, it is most likely that the numbers did not surpass the amount of correspondence sent to Evita and Juan Perón. Some estimate that the Eva Perón Foundation received, on average, 12,000 letters per day. Evita was famous for personally responding to letters, often meeting individually with petitioners. In contrast, as Eduardo Elena notes in his study of letters sent to Perón during the “Perón Wants to Know Campaign,” it was often unclear what happened to letters addressed to Perón once they arrived at government offices. The same was true of the popular correspondence to Alfonsín, which only rarely received a response from one of Alfonsín’s secretaries.

^{xv} This article builds off of a rich and growing body of historical scholarship that investigates Latin America at the end of the twentieth century. See, for example, Louise Walker’s investigation of the role of the Mexican middle class in the context of economic turmoil and political upheaval, *Waking from the Dream: Mexico’s Middle Class After 1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). Her examination of the imbrications of political change and economic crisis in daily life demonstrates the emergence of a social logic that justified neoliberalism among the middle classes. In addition, volume one of Steve Stern’s “Pinochet Trilogy,” *Remembering Pinochet’s Chile: On the Eve of London, 1998*, offers a theoretically grounded view of the challenges of writing recent history (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). See as well: Vania Markarian, *Left in Transformation: Uruguayan Exiles and the Latin American Human Rights Networks, 1967-1984* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and James Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

^{xvi} AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90: 20229/84.

^{xvii} For the history of the UCR see Ezequiel Gallo and Silvia Sigal’s essay, “La Formación de los Partidos Políticos Contemporáneos - la UCR (1891-1916),” in Torcuato S. Di Tella et al., *Argentina, Sociedad de Masas*, (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1965) 24-76; and David Rock, *Politics in Argentina: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism, 1890-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1975. For newer histories of Radicalism see: Ana Virigina Persello, *Historia del Radicalismo* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2007); and Matthew Karush’s examination of Radicalism and working class politics in Rosario during Argentina’s first “transition to democracy” (1912-1930). His study pays close attention to the class identity of new voters and participants in electoral politics, arguing that in the early twentieth century, elites attempted to use democracy and electoral politics to “efface working class identity and replace it with a neutral form of citizenship,” *Workers or Citizens: Democracy and Identity in Rosario, Argentina (1912-1930)* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), p. 2.

^{xviii} Alfonsín and his cohort very deliberately referred to the dawn of the democratic era as a inaugurating a “third historical movement,” which would unite the two leading political movements of the twentieth century. Accordingly, this “third way,” would guide the democratic restoration, leading the way through and beyond the social turmoil and military backlash that, as *Alfonsinistas* claimed, often resulted from the corporatist labor mobilization of Peronism. See, Gerardo Aboy Carlés, *Las dos fronteras de la democracia argentina: la reformulación de las identidades políticas de Alfonsín a Menem*. (Rosario: HomoSapiens Ediciones, 2001).

^{xix} INDEC, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, *La pobreza en la Argentina, indicadores de necesidades básicas insatisfechas a partir de los datos del Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 1980* (Buenos Aires: INDEC, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 1984).

^{xx} Inflation remained high throughout the 1980s, with a massive spike in 1989 during several months of hyperinflation. The consumer inflation rate fluctuated throughout the decade, as the following numbers indicate: 1984: 688%; 1985: 385%; 1986: 81.9%; 1987: 174.8%; 1988: 387.7%; and 1989: 4,923.6%. Figures quoted from: Mario Rapoport, *Historia Económica y Política Social de la Argentina, 1880-2003* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2006), 707.

^{xxi} AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90: 20224/84.

^{xxii} “Con la democracia se come, se cura, y se educa” (“With democracy, one eats, one is cured, and one is educated”) was the hallmark phrase of Alfonsín’s presidential campaign.

^{xxiii} AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 33: 7636-1-003.

^{xxiv} AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90: 1735/84.

^{xxv} AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 3: 28994/84.

^{xxvi} AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90: 20215/84.

^{xxvii} This letter from Alfonsín’s secretary, dated early 1984, was the only “official” response I encountered in the archives. It seems likely that this type of form letter was only sent during the first few months of the Alfonsín presidency, at the height of the greatest amount of support for the recently inaugurated democratic government. AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90: 20115/84.

^{xxviii} For an overview of the state of the Argentine economy at the end of the military regime, see: Klaus Veigel, *Dictatorship, democracy, and globalization: Argentina and the Cost of Paralysis, 1973-2001* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

^{xxix} Gabriel Kessler and Silvia Sigal, “La hiperinflación en Argentina: comportamientos y representaciones sociales” in Darío Canton and Jorge Raúl Jorat, eds. *La investigación social hoy: a cuarenta años de la recreación del Instituto de Sociología (UBA)* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Gino Germani y Oficina de Publicaciones del CBC, 1997).

^{xxx} For more on the early fiscal policies of the Alfonsín government see: Julieta Pesce, “Política y economía durante el primer año del gobierno de Raúl Alfonsín: la gestión del ministro Grinspun,” in Alfredo Puciarelli, ed. *Los Años de Alfonsín: el poder de la democracia o la democracia del poder?* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2006) 367-412. See also: Néstor Restivo and Horacio Rovelli, *El Accidente Grinspun: Un Ministro Desobediente*, “Claves Para Todos,” series editor José Nun (Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual, 2011).

^{xxxi} Raúl Alfonsín, “Hay cuentas que no cierran,” December 29, 1982. Biblioteca UCR, Carpeta Alfonsín No. 1.

^{xxxii} José Luis Machinea (2007, April 4). Interview [CD Video Recording]. Archivo de Historia Oral de la Argentina Contemporánea, Programa de Historia Política del Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani (UBA). Centro de Documentación e Información (IIGG), Buenos Aires.

^{xxxiii} “Bankers Worried About Losses on Argentine Loans,” *The Washington Post*, March 6, 1984, A1.

^{xxxiv} In late September 1984, Argentina reached a preliminary agreement with the IMF and private lending banks, which issued four billion more dollars in loans. At the same time, private lending banks agreed to roll over more than 13 billion in outstanding loans that were due in 1985. For more background on the 1984 debt negotiations see: Veigel, 144.

^{xxxv} AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín”: Legajo 90: 17349/84. María de los Remedios de Escalada de San Martín was the wife of independence leader José de San Martín. She galvanized the support of women from Mendoza to donate their jewels in support of the independence movement.

^{xxxvi} AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 8: 22028/84.

^{xxxvii} One of the first major legislative initiatives of the Alfonsín government was a plan to restructure the unions. The law, which was sent to Congress on December 17, 1983, became known as “La Ley Mucci,” after then Labor Secretary Antonio Mucci. The law’s many provisions, which were meant to dilute Peronist control of the union movement, included open/public control of elections, decentralization, minority representation, and breaking the stronghold of the newly reunited General Confederation of Labor (CGT). After months of debate, the law was rejected in the Senate in March 1984. It constituted a costly legislative defeat for the Alfonsín administration, leading to the replacement of Mucci. More importantly, it set the stage for a renewed Peronist block in Congress and increasingly tense relations between the government and union leaders for the remainder of Alfonsín’s term.

^{xxxviii} Kessler and Sigal, “La hiperinflación en Argentina.”

^{xxxix} Human rights groups paired disappointments over setbacks to justice with pointed criticisms of the administration’s handling of the military and human rights policy. The movement galvanized support to pressure the government to make good on its promises to prosecute the crimes of the regime. Meanwhile, the first rumblings of military discontent struck an ominous chord for the fate of newly restored institutions.

^{xl} Following a change in economic leadership, in June 1985, the Alfonsín administration formally launched the Austral Plan, a heterodox “shock” program aimed at halting inflation, and promoting economic growth and employment. The core of the plan consisted of a monetary reform through the creation of a new currency, the Austral. The currency cut three zeros off of the peso, dramatically reducing inflation almost immediately. The plan also included other pro-market recipes: The central bank committed to curb bill printing, while overall state expenditures were cut from approximately 35% of GDP in 1983, to 28.8% in

1986. The other side of the plan was grounded in a system of prices controls and income policies in the form of wage and tariff freezes, and maximum price listings for basic food stuffs. See: Veigel, 152.

^{xli} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 90: 44199-9-0005.

^{xlii} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 35: 457/8324.

^{xliii} Natalia Milanesio, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013); and Eduardo Elena, *Dignifying Argentina: Peronism, Citizenship, and Mass Consumption* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).

^{xliv} For more on the Argentine debates see: Rapoport, *Historia económica, política y social*. For a regional view of these debates see: Paul Drake, ed. *Money Doctors, Foreign Debts, and Economic Reforms in Latin America from the 1890s to the Present*. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994).

^{xlv} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 40: 58604/84.

^{xlvi} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 90: 44210/84.

^{xlvii} AGN/DAI, "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 417:116390/87.

^{xlviii} Elizabeth Jelin, "Los derechos humanos: entre el estado y la sociedad," in *Nueva Historia Argentina*, vol. 10, *Dictadura y Democracia (1976-2001)*, ed. Juan Suriano (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2005), 507-557.

^{xlix} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 269: 109639.

^l AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 3/8/11: 10794/84.

^{li} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 3/8/11, 10815/84.

^{lii} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 417- 116397.

^{liii} Steve Levitsky, *Transforming labor-based parties in Latin America: Argentine Peronism in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

^{liv} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 46: 124.262.

^{lv} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 46: 124.307.

^{lvi} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 34: 149.93

^{lvii} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo, 270: 273.370.

^{lviii} Claudia Hilb, "La Tablada: el último acto de la guerrilla setentista," *Lucha armada en la Argentina no. 9 año 3*. Buenos Aires (2007).

^{lix} Sergio Serulnikov, "When Looting Becomes a Right: Urban Poverty and Food Riots in Argentina," *Latin American Perspectives*, 21:3, "Social Movements and Political Change in Latin America" (Summer, 1994 pp. 69-89), 72.

^{lx} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 20: 154.003.

^{lxi} Rappaport, 707.

^{lxii} <http://lanic.utexas.edu/larrp/pm/sample2/argentin/alfonsin/893875t.html> (Accessed on 2/10/2010).

^{lxiii} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 20: 153.560.

^{lxiv} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 20: 153.560.

^{lxv} "Robamos para darles comida a nuestros hijos," dicen saqueadoras de Quilmes;" "Saqueos: Acusan a la extrema izquierda," *Diario El Sol*, 30 May 1989.

^{lxvi} Menem was sworn into office on July 8, 1989. The former governor of La Rioja province ran on a promise of a "productive revolution," in concert, at least rhetorically, with his Peronist roots. Yet upon taking office he immediately set out to undo the legacy of his party. In April 1991, the third Minister of Economy, Domingo Cavallo, set in motion "the miracle of the 1990s." His economic plan, known as "convertibility," pegged the peso to the dollar. For a time, the plan resulted in average growth rates of 8% a year and a boom in consumer spending power. But by then the government had already begun selling off its main assets to foreign investors, privatizing, among many others, gas, telephone, airline, postal, water, subway, railroad and electric utilities. Market freedom, however, came at a considerable cost, undoing what remained of social welfare programs and the benefactor state. As the public sector was purged, labor rights were dismantled, sparking the growth of an informal economy and massive inequalities.

^{lxvii} AGN/DAI: "Presidencia Alfonsín," Legajo 274: 152.774.

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