

DEMOCRACY'S CORPSES

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There are many ways to approach the issue of democracy and polity. The authors of three books that we review in this issue have found the key to analyzing the political and social aspects of the governments of their time in the embalming of corpses - two dead and one alive. The corpses of Lenin, Evita and Berlusconi belong to three types of political drama: the ghastly tragedy, the epic tragedy and the comedy. Dense with interesting observations, all these volumes are worth reading in their entirety, but Zbarsky's and Ara's autobiographic accounts are especially fascinating and different from other historical works. Even if weirdly inclined to preserve the dead rather than heal the living, they are both doctors and look at the world with the naïve curiosity of the scientist. They watch their society with the same passionate detachment with which they observe the decay of a corpse. And, in fact, it is not for the pleasure of delving into macabre details that we have extracted the pages that deal with the embalming. The real value of the volumes is in the parts that we have not printed, but our excerpts epitomize their unusually meticulous perspective on society. There is another aspect worth noting. Written in different historical periods, and referring to political situations spanning nearly a century, the books reveal a paradox of democracy: in theory a government of the people, by the people and for the people, but, in practice, unable to exist without the physical presence of an iconic figure to idolize, a king in disguise. But it isn't the ideal of democracy that's at fault. The fault is in the citizens incapable of exercising, in a socially acceptable fashion, the responsibility and freedom that democracy is supposed to grant them. Thus, "the people", prone to emotional judgments and too lazy to labour at rational assessments, prefer to delegate their prerogative to somebody else, a leader that can be much more easily chosen by the rhetoric of the speech and his physical appearance. It could be argued that Stalin's Russia and Peron's Argentina, populist and demagogic, scant in human rights and freedom of expression, were not democracies, but it is hard to deny that the policy of both leaders, at least for some time, reflected

the public opinion of the bulk of citizens, which is the fundamental requirement to define a government as democratic. And likewise democratic is Berlusconi's government in Italy, endorsed in "free" elections by a large majority of "voters", if not a majority of citizens.

Beside these extreme cases, in lesser or higher measure, it is clear that the role of the body is also central to all past, and modern, democracies. The performance of these three leaders, and their corpses, could not be further apart in time and space, but the similarities are striking. In the three books we can see how, to preserve the authority of decaying governments, valiant doctors are engaged in heroic efforts to preserve the decency of the corrupting bodies - Lenin's parting lips, Evita's shrinking nose, Berlusconi's falling face and vanishing hair. Blurred boundaries separate the morticians from the doctors and plastic surgeons - often using the same scalpels, surgical wires and antibacterials - as, with the advancing age, the confines between life and death become thinner and thinner.

Note: Our trailers are a seamless series of excerpts freely assembled in a meaningful fashion by the reviewer to better illustrate the style and standpoint of the authors. They are neither spoilers nor a condensed version of the books, though. They have not been proofed by the authors.