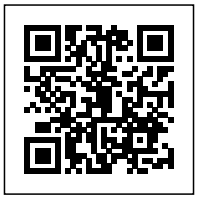
PREFACE

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This text is a slightly revised version of a course delivered around 1970 by the Argentine historian José Luis Romero (1909–1977), who was then at the pinnacle of his intellectual maturity. Shortly before, he had completed his book The Bourgeois Revolution in the Feudal World, an endeavor that took him twenty years of work, and was writing his other two major books: Latin America: Cities and Ideas, published in 1976, and Crisis and Order in the Feudo-Bourgeois World, edited posthumously in 1980.

By that time, he had already planned the books he would write in what he believed was the remainder of his working life: two new volumes that would complete a vast study titled Society and Culture in the Western World, Theory of Historical Life, The Historical Structure of the Urban World, and The Western City. So too was this one, The Bourgeois Mentality, which he was beginning to develop, as was his custom, in lectures and courses.

In 1966, he had stepped away from the university, returning to that state of marginality which, as Tulio Halperin Donghi has noted, characterized his position in Argentine historiography. During the last ten years of his life, he traveled extensively, participated in academic activities in the United States and Europe, and served on the Organizing Committee of the United Nations University in Tokyo, Japan. In Buenos Aires, he devoted himself to writing and to delivering lectures and courses for non-specialized audiences, who were captivated by his charisma as a master. In his lectures, his ability to make himself understood by any audience while simultaneously elevating it was remarkable, all the while maintaining the full rigor of a mind that, by then, had reached a high degree of abstraction.

This situation prompts a reflection that is highly characteristic of Argentine political and cultural history in the second half of the 20th century. A mentor—and there were few—in his full maturity, was unable to reach the students who could have best benefited from his teachings. An intellectual tradition—social and cultural history—that began to develop in the 1950s and 1960s was abruptly interrupted, not only by the academic darkening caused by two long military dictatorships since 1966, but also by the radical cultural and ideological currents that prevailed among the youth.

This changed with the return to democracy in 1983. In 1987, when the first edition of this book was published, José Luis Romero's stature was growing, eventually earning him a prominent place in universities and the academic world. Following his death, his entire body of work has been compiled into thematic volumes, and his books have been reissued and are beginning to be translated. Two of them, published in 1976 —*Latin America: Cities and Ideas* and *Conversations with José Luis Romero* by Félix Luna—reached a wide audience and inspired many young people to devote themselves to

history. Today, José Luis Romero still has things to say to his new readers, both as a historiographical subject and as an inspiration for new readings that uncover the contemporary relevance of his ideas. In short, today José Luis Romero is read as a classic.

The scope of the course is vast and ambitious: the development of the bourgeois mentality, from its emergence in the 11th century to its crisis in our own century. It entails studying not only the entirety of Western culture—the core of which is the bourgeois mentality—but also considering, to some extent, the entire contemporary world, deeply shaped by that culture.

Romero was deeply interested in both long-term historical processes and moments of change—the emergence of a new society and a new mentality. As Ruggiero Romano noted, "his idea—which was almost an obsession—was to capture the moment, the fleeting instant of a society: that of a birth in the midst of a crisis."

Thus, he explores here the formation of the bourgeois mentality within the framework of Christian feudal society between the 11th and 14th centuries, a topic he studied in detail in *The Bourgeois Revolution in the Feudal World*. Beginning in the 14th century, he highlights a process of "veiling" following the open and unmasked emergence of that mentality. This concealment of the ultimate tendencies of the emerging mentality characterized the Renaissance and Baroque society. At the same time, he outlines the major trajectories of the bourgeois mentality up to its maturity in the 18th century with the Enlightenment.

The crisis of the bourgeois mentality, following World War I, is examined in greater detail. It may come as a surprise that the topic of the revolutionary and anti-bourgeois mentality is overlooked, partly because its contents—extensively developed in his 1948 book *The Cycle of the Contemporary Revolution*—are outside the central theme of this study. But also because, rather than adopting the usual opposition between a bourgeois world and a proletarian, socialist one—presented in absolutely mutually exclusive terms, as was customary in the 1970s—he preferred to observe the birth of something new within a bourgeois mentality in crisis. He sought to capture that subtle moment of change in which the sense of a structure's exhaustion, and the confused and contradictory search for alternatives, have not yet crystallized into a new mentality. This was the characteristic he identified in 19th-century Romanticism, and later in contemporary nonconformism, with which this study concludes.

Alongside the specific analysis of the bourgeois mentality, there is an overarching concern with clarifying the structure and dynamics of what he called "historical life." Within his radically historicist vision, this concept was meant to be equivalent, in the field of the social sciences, to the concept of

nature in the physical and natural sciences. At the center of historical life, he identifies the complex and multidirectional relationship between what he termed the factual order and the potential order, or likewise, the real structure and the ideological structure, or more simply, society and culture.

This is the context for his interest in the relationships between social situations, subjects, and mentalities, and particularly the transmutation of concrete experiences into coined mental forms. The relationship he establishes between these mentalities—composed of vague ideas, opinions, non-theorized knowledge, attitudes, and values—and the world of systematic ideas, of ideologies, is equally complex. Once again, the relationship between ideologies and real situations is diverse and cannot be reduced to a single model: sometimes they are distilled forms of mentality; sometimes ideologies vigorously shape mentality; at times they explain a social situation or convince its actors of its legitimacy; at others, they distance themselves, confront them critically, project another alternative, and guide the actions of those who identify with it in that direction.

This complex and changing relationship between two orders of phenomena—between which he establishes no fixed hierarchies—is undoubtedly relevant today, now that the rigid and somewhat naive reductionism that dominated these issues until the end of the 20th century has been set aside. Today, the unilinear determinisms that José Luis Romero confronted in 1970 have been abandoned, and, in general, the underestimation of ideological and cultural phenomena—once relegated to the corner of "false appearances"—has disappeared. His program for the history of culture, with which he identified—and which at the time seemed outdated and obsolete—turned out, paradoxically, to be a cutting-edge framework in the social sciences.

What follows retains the mark of the living word. The text contains everything characteristic of a lecture, including lengthy excursuses, when his interest in a particular aspect led him to explore its many implications. There are also shifts in register: colloquial at times, when he strives to simplify a complex topic; rigorously conceptual, when he believes he has achieved that goal and launches into more complex elaboration.

One perceives the freshness of living thought, recreated through the word. Also evident is a fondness for nuance, anecdote, and significant detail, along with a formidable talent for recreating historical life—complex and simple all at once—and for immersing his interlocutor within it, making them a participant in its recreation and in its very unfolding.

But above all, what stands out is his ability to outline, with rigor and clarity, the broad lines of development—those "formidable syntheses that flow with admirable ease," as the historian Ezequiel Gallo recalled—those that, starting from the most remote past, connect with the vast and confusing

present, illuminating it and making it clear and understandable. It is easy to recognize in these pages not only the historian but also the mentor.

Luis Alberto Romero

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