A HISTORY OF ARGENTINE POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Thomas F. McGann of the University of Texas has made a distinct contribution by translating into English the excellent survey of Argentine political thought written by José Luis Romero, a distinguished author and professor of history at the University of Buenos Aires. The translation has been accomplished with exceptional skill, and besides being authoritatively informative, the book is a pleasure to read from the standpoint of style. The short introduction by McGann provides a highly perceptive, indeed brilliant, interpretation of the entire sweep of Argentine history.

The first part of Romero's survey is devoted to the colonial period. The principal contention advanced is that in colonial times, "two concepts of life came face to face and were distilled into two political attitudes: authoritarianism and liberalism… they were locked in struggle… and their duel continued uninterruptedly during the period of independence" (p. 8).

In the second section of the book, Romero traces Argentine development from 1810 through the 1870's. The major feature of this period was the war without quarter "between the Unitarians and the Federalists—two philosophies of life rather than two political beliefs" (p. 126). The Unitarians sought to follow the European tradition, especially as exemplified by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and advocated classical liberalism. The Federalists attempted to safeguard the Hispanic-creole tradition as maintained by the rural masses and conservative intellectuals. In his alleged policy of supporting federalism, Juan Manuel de Rosas, dictator during most of the 1829-1852 period, initially enjoyed the support of the great majority of Argentine people. This fact vastly concerned the young intellectuals of the "Generation of 1837," including such outstanding figures as Juan Bautista Alberdi, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and Esteban Echeverría, who staunchly opposed the Rosas tyranny. Their concern over the popularity of Rosas led many of these intellectuals to conclude that the social milieu of Argentina did not warrant the degree of democracy which the early proponents of liberalism had favoured.

The third and concluding section deals with the so-called "Alluvial Period," which opened in approximately 1880, when Argentina began to undergo a profound mutation. Massive immigration of men, ideas, and capital was the principal cause of the transformation process, a fundamental feature of which came to be the widening gulf between the masses and the elite. The liberals who had controlled Argentina since the overthrow of Rosas grew ever more aristocratic and conservative, while the masses increasingly demanded an expanding measure of democracy. Romero properly observes that the issues introduced in Argentina's alluvial period have not yet been settled.

Writing on the rule of Juan Domingo Perón, Romero is perhaps too inclined to categorize the dictatorship as purely fascistic. He fails to give sufficient attention to the initial stages of social revolution that Peronismo brought to Argentina. If the Generation of 1837 learned that social conditions in Argentina proscribed genuine participation in the nation's life on the part of the masses, apparently the post-Perón generation of intellectuals has not yet been able to reach the necessary consensus that contemporary conditions demand fuller participation for the masses, both in the political and economic life of the nation.

Romero's book will be valued by anyone wishing to understand the basis of the present chaotic situation in Argentina. Probably of greater use to the general reader than to the specialist, it reveals the origins of the bitter ideological cleavages that have operated, especially in the past eight years, to prevent Argentina from living up to its potential.