

HISTORY AND COMMITMENT: THE WRITINGS OF JOSÉ LUIS ROMERO

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José Luis Romero (1909-1977) was one of the greatest Latin American historians, whose intellectual caliber put him in a category above your average historical expert. His was the type of historian seen all too infrequently: a humanist. If he had one trait, and without loss of any technical discipline, it was breadth of vision: the broad scope of his research projects and the variety of historical eras, fields, and sub-disciplines he cultivated. Without denying that such an inclination might reveal a temperamental nature, it was also influenced by the environment in which he was educated. The early progress under the tutorship of Pedro Henríquez Ureña, the proximity to Alejandro Korn and his group in the city of La Plata, and the closeness to his brother Francisco, the philosopher, who was his first guide, were all factors that, apart from instilling in him the ethic of hard work and a deeply serious approach to intellectual study, also added a touch of the philosophical and a philosopher's tendency to look at things in depth and breadth. Having great teachers matters not so much for what one learns, as because it makes it very hard to reconcile oneself to a future not, in intention at least, worthy of them.

The work of José Luis Romero is of course bound up with his own life story, with world events in the twentieth century, and with Latin American history, in particular that of Argentina. His work is also enmeshed with the history of the university to whose renovation he was a key contributor, from which he was ejected in 1946, to which he returned as rector in 1955, and which he chose to leave in 1965 when he was Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts because the university world had become so politicized as to exceed his patience and equanimity. This set of experiences further buttressed his work as an erudite researcher, an essayist of ideas, a man who felt passionately about the problems of his day, and an interpreter of the reality of his country and of Latin America. But it is only his work, without the context of his life and thinking, that we will touch on fleetingly in these few lines, written for those needing to learn something about the character of José Luis Romero, but superfluous for those already intimately familiar with it.

José Luis Romero was born into a family of Spanish immigrants in Buenos Aires in 1909 and died in Tokyo in 1977, while there was still a great deal to expect from an active man in his prime. He studied at the Universidad de La Plata, where he obtained a history doctorate in 1938. His early books dealt with Greco-Roman antiquity. His doctoral thesis, *La crisis de la república romana*, was published in 1942. *El Estado y las facciones en la Antigüedad* first appeared in 1938. In a similar vein was his book, *De Herodoto a Polibio. El pensamiento histórico de la cultura griega* (1952), which contains lucid accounts of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius, and also of the background of Greek historiography and other historiographical aspects of the Hellenistic Age. Also on the theme of the

history of historiography is his book *Maquiavelo historiador* (1943; 2nd ed., 1970), an interpretation of the Florentine based on the contradiction Romero detected in the man between his historical questing and systematic political positioning.

In the 1940s he devoted himself more to the study of the Middle Ages. His position as a medievalist, though attested to by important works, should be qualified, however. More than specializing in a given historical period his real interest was the pursuit of a well-defined plan: to find, in the depths of the medieval period the birth of the modern world, from the shaping and development of the bourgeois mentality and the rising prominence of urban existence. He believed that process to be the origin of a fundamental transformation of the western world, the effects of which last even today. Accordingly, his plan later took on the vestiges of a grand design: to complete a real history of the West. The first part of this design was completed with *La revolución burguesa en el mundo* (1967, 2nd ed., 1979), which covers the 3rd to 14th centuries a.d. The book describes first the establishment of the Christian-feudal system and, from the 11th century onward, the beginnings and evolution of the bourgeois mentality until the feudo-bourgeois system, as Romero called it, became established. In order to explain the "mechanics of the change", this extensive search combined attention to aspects of economic and social reality together with analysis of conflicting outlooks and mentalities, something that was characteristic of Romero's research, as well as making him an exponent of the history of ideas, though in the broad sense of the phrase, as he repeatedly stated. The second stage of the project was completed, though not fully, owing to the author's demise, with *Crisis y orden en el mundo feudoburgués* (posthumous, 1980). Had his project continued, it would have explored the rise of the bourgeoisie as far as the 18th century, and then its crisis from the 18th to the 20th century.

In 1948, before completing these works, Romero published *El ciclo de la revolución contemporánea*, which he described as "an attempt at a historical explanation of our time." The book shows the last stages of the bourgeois mentality and interests –by then, capitalist pure and simple– and their clash with the "revolution," that is, with a movement of ideas based on a fairer concept of the organization of society. As he himself said in the prologue to *La revolución burguesa en el mundo feudal*, in *El ciclo de la revolución contemporánea* he was putting forward hypotheses on the bourgeoisie and their decline in the 19th and 20th centuries that he was only able to corroborate after lengthy study of medieval history and the early modern period. The above reveals that the source of our author's inquiring attitude was a constant pendulum-like movement between past and present. As an oft-quoted remark that he made to Félix Luna attests: "History is not concerned with the past. It asks the past about things that concern living man..."

The works mentioned above were not the only ones on the list of Romero's medieval writings. Others appear in the posthumous compilation, *¿Quién es el burgués? y otros estudios de historia medieval* (1984), in the reprinted edition of his synthetic work, *La cultura occidental* (1984), and in a collection called *La Edad Media* (1949). Along with social history, of which he was a pioneer in Argentina, Romero also cultivated the history of culture, and was founder and editor of an exceptionally high quality magazine devoted to the latter discipline called *Imago Mundi*.

José Luis Romero's work on Latin America, in particular on Argentina, makes up the other half of his historical writings. It is impossible to give a concise idea of what his writings in this field –somewhere between history, essay, and editorial– contained. *Las ideas políticas en Argentina*, possibly his most widely read work of this ilk, was first published in 1946. Reprinted on several occasions and translated into English, the work provides a fresh perspective on material used many times before, starting with a new arrangement of periods. The term “Argentina aluvial” (alluvial Argentina) for instance, which became a catchphrase, comes from that book, which, Romero used to say, arose more from his obligation as a citizen than as a historian. *El desarrollo de las ideas en la sociedad argentina del siglo XX* (1965) is another attempt to find a nexus between the social world and conceptual schemes or ideas, the latter always understood in very broad terms. His many articles, studies, and essays about Argentinean politics, society, and culture were fortunately collected in *La experiencia argentina* (1980). A similar compilation containing Romero's writings on the history of Latin America –also impossible to summarize here– was arranged under the title, *Situaciones e ideologías en Latinoamérica* (1986), to which *El pensamiento político de la derecha latinoamericana* (1970) should be added.

However, his premier work in this area is of course *Latinoamérica: las ciudades y las ideas* (1976) (Latin America: its cities and ideas). This book attempts to grasp the history of Latin America in its entirety from the perspective of the role played in it by urban societies. The book has, therefore, an original vantage point, but one familiar to Romero because of the role played by cities in the formation of the bourgeoisie in Europe, and which he now applied to Latin America, though naturally respecting the continent's idiosyncrasies and recognizing the condition and significance of rural life. At each stage of the urban evolution, he portrays society's development and the mentalities betrayed by the various situations and predominant interests. Once again, then, reality is combined with ideas, in this case with the cities as the key to interpreting the whole phenomenon.

Encompassing an extraordinary wealth of material, which does not, however, encumber the natural flow of the text (the book does not contain a single footnote, the author interpreting sources directly, without making excessive references to secondary writings), Romero moves unerringly from one end of the region to the other describing the changes and varied functions of urban societies throughout the history of Latin America, from the cities of the Spanish nobility in the Indies to the overcrowded metropolises of today. The book belongs in a category of writings that come along

only very seldom, but when they do, are a lasting source of ideas and influence. Tulio Halperin Donghi considered it "a great book, not only in the context of Romero's writings, but also in Latin American historiography." It would not be an exaggeration to say that it is not possible to write about society, culture, or ideas in Latin America without a prior, almost *de rigueur*, reading of Latin America: its cities and ideas.

Lastly, there is another distinguishing trait of José Luis Romero's that could not possibly be left out: his reflections on his profession from the point of view of the theory of history. Romero's texts on this topic have been gathered together in a volume entitled *La vida histórica* and, though published posthumously, were written over the course of the author's working life. True to the environment in which he was brought up, José Luis Romero never strayed very far from philosophy, while never ceasing to ply his trade as an historian. Philosophy was not far away when he drew very general and comprehensive sketches in which history ceased to be a world of facts and was arranged instead as a broad universe of meaning. Nor was it very distant when he revealed his constant preoccupation with the problems of the theory (and even philosophy) of history, a concern not often observed in his profession.

José Luis Romero was, then, a remarkable intellectual figure: in his country, in Latin America, in Spanish-language historiography. (Ruggiero Romano, who knew Chabod, Braudel, and Lucien Febvre, once said in an interview, "For me, someone like Romero ranks as an equal among these great men. No more, no less."). One might say that all his work derived from two sources or impulses: a deep-seated historical vocation and a permanent preoccupation with the problems of his time and of his world. History and commitment might be the phrase that best captures his basic intellectual attitude. In him, it is impossible to separate the historian from the man concerned with the present. Nor can the answers that the present demands be explained without historical study.

Much has rightly been said of the exclusion of José Luis Romero from mainstream scholarship. He lived on the fringes of the historical circles of his milieu because he would not conform to the documentalism that dominated them and wished for a history on a grander scale. He was unique as a historian of the Middle Ages in a country where conditions were not conducive to such a task. He was on his own among European medievalists because he did not belong to any of the schools that shaped and sustained them. As true as all this may have been, he was untroubled by incongruity. He knew, and so he wrote in an essay few remember today that, "real intellectual vocation, even when it breaks free of all constraints, needs no justification." It is, he said, "a condition of existence, and whoever realizes that they only exist by virtue of that must abide by it and face all the risks and responsibilities it entails." Those who wish to remain faithful to that vocation, he concluded, "must carefully preserve their own righteous incongruity." His was a magnificent incongruity and it led him to shape projects on a scale that others could not even have imagined; it gave him the will to carry

them out until almost the day he died; and it enabled him to show that talent that is out of the ordinary will eventually find a way through the cracks of even the most daunting adversity.

Sergio Bagú once wondered why *La revolución burguesa en el mundo feudal*, which he considered on a par with the writings of Marc Bloch, had never been translated into French or English. The question applied as well (I am sure that Bagú felt the same) to Latin America: its cities and ideas. Well now, if a partial consolation will do, for the latter work at least the time has come to set things right with the edition you now hold open before you.

Numerous articles have been written in appreciation of José Luis Romero. Authors include: Sergio Bagú, Gregorio Weinberg, Natalio Botana, Alberto Ciria, Adolfo Prieto, Oscar Terán, and Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot (who compiled an anthology). The most complete work to date is that of Tulio Halperin Donghi, "José Luis Romero y su lugar en la historiografía argentina" (1980). We have Luis Alberto Romero, his son and likewise a historian, to thank for a series of timely new editions and compilations of his father's material that facilitate analysis of his work.

