

JOSE LUIS ROMERO: ARGENTINA TODAY [ENTREVISTA, 1967]. MILITARY COUPS WILL CONTINUE UNTIL THE WORKERS STABILIZE"

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STEPHEN D. LERNER

(The following represents a single interview with Jose Luis Romero, an Argentine Socialist and medieval scholar who is currently teaching at Columbia University before returning to Argentina next July.)

In 1945 when Juan Peron gained control of the Ministry of War, the Department of Labor, and the vice-presidency of Argentina, there were a few gutsy intellectuals who denounced him as a power-hungry Fascist.

Jose Luis Romero counted himself among this group and, the following year, when Peron was properly elected to the Pink House, Romero had to flee the country and seek asylum in Montevideo. Romero had ten years to reconsider his initial impression of Peron, and only after the *jefe unico* had been ousted by the Argentine Navy could he return to his country.

When Romero says that he is still suffering for the anti-Peronist stance he took some 20 years ago, the North American mind boggles. But in Argentina, politics are not just talked about, they are acted out. Politics become a way of life, and a man's ideological position is not quickly forgotten.

Romero is a Socialist whom the workers no longer trust. Although ideologically he would like to work with the progressive labor group, most of these are old Peronistas who don't believe he really has their best interests at heart. Romero is a victim of political obsolescence; he points out that the younger generation does not face the same kind of conflict because they weren't around when Peron took office. Thus the young people who identify with the *Partido Peronista* don't remember that Peron was a great admirer of Mussolini – they don't remember how he whipped the labor unions into line and played them off against the military giant he helped create. They only remember that Peron put the laborers on the political map in Argentina.

Romero looks at the Argentine political game with the eyes of an old player who has been put in the penalty box of eternity. He feels the heat of the competition and the flush of frustration, but he can do no more than give a running commentary on the progress of play.

Evaluating the present military regime under General Onganía, Romero finds it clearly unacceptable. The coups will continue until an appropriate leader is found – and that will almost certainly mean that Onganía will have to go.

The future form of government will be like Peron's. The masses will be organized and have important influence, but with the understanding that the Conservatives retain the directing positions.

The different political parties will play only a minimal role in deciding where this leader is chosen from, Romero continued. It will be the Church, Big Business, Big Labor, and the military who cast the final vote.

The present regime has restricted certain civil liberties – the autonomy of the universities, for instance – but Romero feels that the restrictions are mild when compared with those of past regimes. (Peron, for example, revived the death penalty for conspiracy against the government and refused workers the right to strike.) The restrictions placed on the University, Romero continued, are designed to keep the potentially revolutionary element of the population out of the political arena.

In principle, the military takes over the government only when the civilians are incapable of maintaining a stable anti-Communist regime. However, the Argentine military has a remarkably flexible definition of stable government. The military will hand over the government to the civilians again only when they are convinced that the workers are finished with their revolutionary ideology – only when the workers have a firm platform which satisfies the industrialists and the petit bourgeois, and which pays off the military.

The present government, according to Romero, represents a delicate balance between two factions: the Conservative, Catholic, economically liberal (in the traditional sense) faction, and the Progressive, Catholic workers.

But what Romero sees as the current situation and the coming possibilities differs dramatically from his ideal. The author of one of the many splits of the Argentine Socialist Party, Romero would like to see an industrial system of capitalist dimensions, but controlled by the state and not by the industrialists – who to his mind are as bad as the old oligarchy.

Romero notes, however, that this kind of dream will never be realized in Argentina because of the workers' middle class mentality. They have the old Horatio Alger instincts and are only concerned with satisfying their own interests; they are convinced they could only lose in any kind of fundamental social revolution. The revolutionary potential of Argentina will not be found in any particular economic strata, but rather in ideological groups. While you can't say that the workers or the peasants are potentially revolutionary, you can say that certain political parties on the Left are, Romero continues.

The revolutionary initiative in Latin American nations has traditionally come from the students and intellectuals. Romero, who once served as dean at the University of Buenos Aires and recently came to Columbia University to study the origins of the medieval city, is a prime example of the dilemma of the intellectuals in Argentina. They have been deprived, the highest profits and not in those which induce the economic development of Argentina. There are eight different kinds of cars being manufactured in Argentina today, Romero continues, and although this looks impressive statistically as heavy industry, it does almost nothing for economic progress in Argentina.

Romero sees three groups of Argentines, each with a different approach to the influx of foreign capital. First are those who are after all the investment they can attract. Second are those who would bring in industries which will eventually be phased out but which will train the Argentine middle class in special entrepreneurial skills. Finally there are those who remember the days when England owned all the Argentine transport system and many of the valuable resources. This is the group which is against any U.S. investment because it probably will exploit a resource Argentina is already rich in instead of developing an industry the country needs. Romero says that he finds himself somewhere between the second and third groups.

The lure of Castroism and independence from the influence of the U.S. has captured the imagination of many a Latin American nationalist. However, because of the relative insignificance of the Communist Party in Argentina and the workers' monetary mentality, Romero finds that most of the Argentines are anti-Castro. A few of them, he admits, may feel twinges of sympathy for their Latin American brothers who have had the courage to tell the Yankees off.

As for Argentine opinions on U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Romero says it varies with political convictions and that there is no universal denunciation of "American imperialism." The Right is glad that the U.S. is killing Communists while the Left is none too pleased.

Romero's analysis of Argentine politics is not an optimistic one. With the dispassionate eye of a man who knows he will not live to see his country governed in the way he thinks it should be, Romero foresees an Argentina which will continue under military control until the capitalist elites have the support of the organized unions. He foresees no chance of a fundamental social revolution, but rather the growth of a wealthy class of entrepreneurs who live off trading and no investment in their country's future.

