LA EXPERIENCIA ARGENTINA Y OTROS ENSAYOS, DE J.L. ROMERO.

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José Luis Romero is best known in the English-speaking world for his history of Argentine political thought, in which Argentine history was interpreted largely in cultural and ideological terms. This volume continues in the same tradition, being a collection of the articles Romero wrote between 1929 and 1976. There are essays here on Argentine history, culture and historiography, Newmanesque pieces on the 'idea of a university' and on the particular problems of Argentine universities. Finally there are some penetrating reflections on contemporary politics in Argentina and on the nation's 'legitimation crisis'.

As an historian of Argentina, Romero regards himself as an amateur, animated by civic virtù; his professional fields of interest are the ancient and medieval worlds. He paints in broad strokes, and on the whole this method is remarkably successful in conveying the panorama of River Plate history. His main thesis is that Argentine history is discontinuous: it divides into Argentina criolla and Argentina aluvial. The former lasted from 1810 to 1880; this was a highly stratified society, rooted in a Spanish culture with ethnic, social and culture coherence and minimal social mobility. It was replaced by Argentina aluvial, a product of mass immigration. There was a certain overlap between the two periods, since the Constitution of 1853 in the former provided the political institutions that acted as a safety net for the ethnic and social progress in the latter. Because of the discontinuity between the periods before and after 1880, Romero maintains that Argentine reality cannot be sought in tradition, as can that of England, say. Since the days of Sarmiento, Mitre and Alberdi, Argentina has undergone a qualitative as well as quantitative change.

As an historian of culture, Romero is particularly interested in the impact on a traditional hispanic culture of European nineteenth-century liberalism. It is figures from this century he most often refers to: Dickens, Carlyle, Macaulay, Renan. Similarly it is Argentine literary works of the same period that he concentrates on: José Hernández and Martín Fierro, Alberdi and the Fragmento preliminar al estudio del derecho, Sarmiento's Facundo, Esteban Echeverría's Dogma Socialista, the Memorias of José María Paz. Some of the most illuminating insights in the book occur in these essays. Romero points out that Argentina cannot be understood from the perspective of 'Spanish America'. Argentine culture is Mediterranean, not purely Spanish: a mixture of Spain and Italy 'in which the transcendence of Calderón is combined with the immanence of Boccaccio'.

Romero is penetrating and incisive as a critic of historiography. The three great figures in this field in the nineteenth century were Sarmiento, Mitre and Vicente Fidel López. There is a comprehensive treatment of Mitre as historian: his greatest achievement, says Romero, was in his account of 1852.

Mitre is contrasted as historian with Sarmiento (Romero's hero) as follows: Sarmiento's approach is concerned with the decisive part played by Creative action on the brute facts of necessity; Mitre searches for the fixed principles of history which would guide a statesman on the true path of Argentine reality. Hence the Mitre archetypes are San Martín, Belgrano and Rivadavia, the true authors, for Mitre, of national organization, while Sarmiento's exemplars are Facundo Quiroga, Aldao and El Chacho.

The deficiencies in Romero's approach are to a large extent endemic in his methodology. Like his apparent mentor Croce, he overrates the role of ideas in history. He is overfond of dissolving the concrete into the abstract or the abstract into the even more abstract, as when Sarmiento's famous 'civilization versus barbarism' becomes 'freedom versus necessity'. The broad brushstrokes blot out nuances: it is, for example, at best a half-truth that the Paraguayan war was fought to secure freedom of river navigation. Figures as diverse as Mitre, Alberdi, Sarmiento and Urquiza ('a converso not a machiavellian') are regarded-as belonging to the same species of 'winners'. Sarmiento and Alberdi are lumped together as men who recognized the importance of the gaucho tradition and wished to incorporate it in Argentine reality. To the obvious objection that this clashes with Sarmiento's well-known and ferocious animadversions on the gauchos, Romero replies that Sarmiento was ambivalent: he admired and hated the caudillos at the same time. Some of the contradictions in these essays are explicable in terms of the wide time-span over which they were written, as Romero changed his mind, but some are not. Romero constantly overrates the strength of the democratic tradition in Argentina and underrates the propensity towards authoritarianism.

Romero's political essays act as a barometer for the plummeting fortunes of Argentina. At the beginning of his writing life he is full of liberal optimism. At the end, in 1976, he speaks of a catastrophic moral crisis, reflected in the popular tangos, where scepticism descends to new depths. Romero has harsh things to say about most of the political figures since 1930, but on Perón he is particularly perceptive, and this is perhaps the acid test of any commentator on Argentina. He is too subtle a thinker to go in for crude denunciations of 'el conductor', and some of the essays reveal considerable sympathy for and insight into Perón. For all that, he concludes that Perón was a disaster for the working class by diverting it from socialism. And he sees 1973 as a great opportunity thrown away. Just as the 1880 generation bears the responsibility for not having properly channelled the thoughts of the immigrants into the real socio-economic possibilities of Argentina, so the Peronist leadership in 1973 bears the historical responsibility of not having known what to do with the movement it presided over. Romero mocks the slogans 'All Power to Perón' and 'El viejo sabe'. Unfortunately, as he points out, the old man did not know.