LAS IDEAS POLÍTICAS EN ARGENTINA

Posted on 18/01/2023 by Facundo Iturburu



YSABEL F. RENNIE

Anyone who knows modern Argentina has noted the apparent contradictions in its national life. On the one hand is a personal individualism which verges on lawlessness: on the other, an authoritarian concept of government which finds the state meddling in the minutest details of daily life. To the North American, it is hard to comprehend that those elements which are least liberal should represent the aspirations of popular democracy, as we understand it; while those who have been political liberals, who created Argentina's fine free press and respect for individual liberties, have been the bitter-end enemies of democracy.

José Luis Romero's lucid history of political ideas in Argentina does much to explain the enigma. Spain's colonial administration in the Río de la Plata was from the first a nice blend of authoritarian centralization and disregard for law. Laws were broken by the men who made them partly in recognition of the truth that they were unenforceable, partly because the Spanish bureaucrat, in America for a few years at most, wished to amass a fortune in the most direct manner possible.

A more serious obstacle to strong government was the land itself, vast and unpopulated. Here each man was a law unto himself. Though Bourbon might succeed Hapsburg, and the republic succeed Bourbon, the pampa proved indomitable. The knife was lawbook and leveller: let Buenos Aires legislate as it would, its arm reached no further than the environs of the capital. Beyond was anarchy.

Not only Spain, but the infant republic came to grief against the fact of distance. The revolution of 1810 was the work of a few intellectuals, touched by the Enlightenment, who lived in Buenos Aires and had no concept of the enormous, empty land behind the port city. It is a comment on their naïveté that Mariano Moreno, fearing that the masses were unprepared for self-government, proposed that each inhabitant be given a copy of Rousseau's Social Contract.

Events were to show that the combination of unrealistic government with the ignorance and intense local feeling of the average Argentine made a real federal union impossible. The Revolution of 1810 squandered its inheritance on half a century of civil war. As Romero shows, the war was one of the aristocratic, enlightened, Europeanized liberals of the capital against the ignorant, jealous masses of the interior. Yet it was those masses who represented nascent democracy, even though in their political innocence they turned to Juan Manuel de Rosas as the embodiment of their aspirations.

The overthrow of the tyrant Rosas brought strong government and great economic growth to the

country. But the liberal oligarchy who took his place were no friends of the poorer classes, and their jealousy of the rising middle class led eventually to a fight with no holds barred, in which fraud was tempered with outright repression in a futile effort to prevent the majority from taking over the reins of government.

Romero shows the importance of the Revolution of 1890 in this battle between landed oligarchy and the urban middle class. He does not show, however, how the political triumph of the middle-class Radical Party resulted in another betrayal for the Argentine people. Like most Argentine writers, Dr. Romero does not deal with contemporary and near-contemporary events, however strongly he might feel about them.

He believes that the traditional forces have played a secondary role in Argentina since the 1920's, when the country became a battleground of those worldwide political ideologies whose struggle is not yet done. The conservative oligarchy, he believes, turned to fascism, while many intellectuals and some workers sought in communism a solution to the nation's ills. A socialist himself, Romero detests both extremes.

Such an analysis, however, fails to account for the role of Juan D. Perón as a recent political phenomenon. No conservative, Perón has been tinged with fascism; no intellectual, he yet understands and uses Marxist terminology. For all the elements of foreign ideology, his role is essentially the one which Rosas played a century ago. He has built a popular dictatorship by exploiting the democratic aspirations of the great, inarticulate mass of Argentines.

Thus we return to the paradox that in Argentina democracy has meant dictatorship, and class rule, political liberalism. The conclusion is difficult to avoid that without political preparation, no people can be successful in the democratic experiment. In Argentina, education for self-government has been limited to the few, the privileged, and the educated.

Dr. Romero's history is very good indeed. It is unfortunate he did not see fit to bring it up to date; but ending where it does, it still illumines those dark corners which baffle any serious student of Argentine political history.