A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century

Luis Alberto Romero
translated by James P. Brennan
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Preface

In this synthesis of twentieth-century Argentine history, I have not sought—as is generally the case in this type of book—either to prove a thesis or to find that unique and revealing cause of a singular, in this case somewhat infelicitous, national destiny. I have merely attempted to reconstruct the history—complex, contradictory, and unique—of a society that unquestionably has experienced better moments and that finds itself currently at one of the lowest points in its history but whose future is not, I trust, definitively sealed. The questions around which this text is organized—questions born of Argentina’s anguished and tumultuous national experience—are only some of the many possible ones; and their explication reveals the individual selection that an undertaking of this kind entails.

The first question posed by the book is what place in the world today exists for Argentina—which so assuredly inserted itself into a very different world order more than one hundred years ago—and what is its feasible economic organization? What kind of economic structure can Argentines strive for that would guarantee some of the country’s basic goals, such as society’s general welfare, a reasonable degree of economic progress, and a certain rationality in public life? A similar question was asked by Juan Bautista Alberdi, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and those who a century and a half ago outlined the design of modern Argentina. But unlike the situation when our founding fathers posed the question, the answer today is neither obvious nor at hand. Today the same question is formulated from a more modest perspective and with fewer illusions than one hundred and fifty years ago because now an *aurea mediocritas* seems to us a more desirable destiny.

The second interrogative refers to the characteristics, functions, and instruments that the state must have to guarantee the common good, regulate
and rationalize the economy, ensure justice, and improve social equality. Once again, the interrogative poses, in a much less promising context, questions that Argentine society debated and to a certain degree resolved more than half a century ago, answers that today are outdated or have simply been discarded, but that have not yet been replaced.

The third question concerns the world of culture and intellectuals and the conditions that can foster creativity or ideas that can be simultaneously critical, rigorous, and politically engaged and that fulfill a task that can be useful to society, analyzing social reality and proposing alternatives. Thus it happened in the Argentina of the centennial in 1910, during the fleeting experience of the decade of the 1960s, or for an even briefer moment during the hopeful return to democracy in the 1980s. The latter two experiences are close enough to remind us that such conditions are generally neither common nor easy to obtain.

Looming over these interrogatives are more distressing questions, those that most reveal that Argentina is at a crossroads, questions that concern the intersection of society and democracy. What possibilities are there to preserve or rebuild a democratic society combined with social mobility, one not partitioned into isolated worlds but one that is relatively egalitarian and with opportunities for everyone, based on competition but also on solidarity and social justice? All this constitutes the legacy, today more valuable than ever, built over the course of a century and a half, one that endured until the not-too-distant past, until a mere quarter century ago, at which point the momentum began to break down and reverse course.

Above all, there is the question about what characteristics the political system should have to ensure democracy and make of it a practice with some social meaning. In this case, the past reveals itself rich in conflicts, but it is not easy to find in it very many accomplishments, not even in periods of democratic rule, when there can be perceived in nuce the practices that carried to destruction institutions that had never fully matured and whose reconstruction appears now a Herculean task. Perhaps for that reason the last question is today the first one: What is the future of our democracy and of the tradition that nourishes it? We must return to Sarmiento and Alberdi and a task that we a bit naively considered to have been finished and whose accomplishments today seem fragile and vulnerable.
A book informed by such concerns is at once the work of a professional historian and a personal reflection on the present. It could not be any other way. Any attempt at historical reconstruction derives from the necessities, doubts, and preoccupations of the present, seeking a balance between professional rigor and personal opinion, but knowing that the scales frequently tip toward the latter the closer the historian is to the period or the subject under analysis. Indeed, writing this book has led me, in good measure, to abandon a more customary style of work and submerge myself in my own personal story and in a past experience that is still alive.

This was first revealed to me on attempting to make use of the ideas employed twenty years ago when, working with Alejandro Rofman, I sketched an outline of Argentine history and discovered how little use the ideas were to me now. The questions we posed then were aimed at explaining the roots of dependency and their baleful effects on the economy and society. Questions relating to democracy and republican institutions did not seem relevant to us, and, in general, politics appeared as merely a reflection of structural conditions, or conversely as an unstructured place where, through sheer willpower, such conditions could be changed, because in the collective consciousness then the perception of dependency was complimented by the search for some kind of liberation.

This dilemma is, I believe, a good example of a platitude in our profession: Historical consciousness guides historical understanding, and though the latter can impose limits on the former and subject it to the rigors of evidence, it cannot ignore it altogether. In previous years, the central idea in a historical reconstruction of this type would perhaps have emphasized social justice and economic independence, while for an even earlier period it would have been progress, modernization, or even the building of the state and nation. These concerns certainly have not disappeared for the historian and are to be found in this text as they were in their own times as aspirations, ideologies, or mobilizing utopias. The problems that they addressed are also present in today’s concerns, but their ranking, connections, and accent are different, as the questions around which this text is organized bear witness. The world in which we live, whose outlines we can only barely see, is radically different not only from that one hundred or even fifty years ago but also from that a mere twenty years back.
It is generally believed that one who writes thinks either implicitly or explicitly of the reader. I began to write this book thinking of my colleagues, but I gradually came to realize that my implicit readers were my children and those of their younger generation, the ones who had almost no information about our recent past, not even of the horrors of just yesterday, because our society less and less preserves its collective memory, perhaps because it presently suffers from a great difficulty in envisioning its future. In various parts of the book, I simply wanted to leave a testimony, perhaps unnecessary for scholars familiar with this history but necessary as a civic act, because I remain convinced that only an awareness of the past permits constructing the future. At a time when the pessimism of reason struggles with the heart’s optimism, I want to continue believing in the ability of men and women to make their history, to confront the circumstances in which they are fated to live, and to build a better society.

I am grateful to Alejandro Katz for his confidence that I could write this book and to Juan Carlos Korol and Ricardo Sidicaro for their careful reading of this text and their criticisms. I regret only that I could not have followed their suggestions in all cases. When I began to write this book, I asked Leandro Gutiérrez to play the part of critic, and he promised, as was customary between us, a brutally frank and stimulating dialogue. I am sorry that his death made this impossible, but I am certain that much of his penetrating, even acerbic, but enormously warm critical spirit is present in these pages; from no one, except my father, have I learned so much about history.
Preface to the English-Language Edition

With this book, I hope to offer English-speaking readers a broad overview of Argentina’s contemporary history and of the country’s current problems, such as they at present appear to be. The book was originally written for students and the general public in Argentina, that is, for people who, it was assumed, knew little about Argentine history. Thus, I have sought above all to explain with clarity processes and events that were enormously complex. I have based my conclusions not only on my own scholarship but also on that of my fellow historians—the best of them—and I cannot say what it is that is original in this book, save a personal viewpoint, a perspective, and a synthesis. I do not know whether I have managed to offer a profound analysis, but I do believe I have succeeded in offering a clear one, a book that can be read to good effect by students and all those interested in the past trajectory and future of Argentina.

This English-language edition coincides with the publication of the second edition of the Spanish-language one. For the second edition, I added a new chapter dealing with the ten years (1989–99) of the government of Carlos Saúl Menem, a decade we Argentines refer to as the menemato. This new chapter brings with it the problems that are unavoidable in dealing with so recent an experience. On examining those years, I realized that I lacked the generosity and impartiality that I believe I achieved in analyzing earlier periods, even those I lived intensely. Although if I have detested anything in my life, it is the menemato, I am fully aware that such strong feelings are not the best path to understanding. I was helped in overcoming my biases by some recent excellent studies on economic policies and reform of the state during the Menem years. Nonetheless, it was not easy for me to integrate as rigorous an analysis on that other very characteristic dimension of Menem’s government:
Preface to the English-Language Edition

dimension dealing with the singular behavior of the ex-president Menem, his family, friends, and cronies, that is to say, the members of the gang that for ten years governed the country. I have simply attempted to provide as much objectivity as I am capable of on these controversial aspects of our recent history.

As I said in the Preface, I wrote this book thinking of my children, of Argentina's students, and of all those young people who needed to know something about what happened in our country. With this translation, I am thinking of those in the United States and those in other countries who are able to read about this history in the English language. We live in a world in which national borders are becoming increasingly blurred. This brings with it both a risk and an opportunity. The risk is the temptation to enclose oneself in what is familiar, whether it be the individual or the nation, and resist those changes, which are indeed in many cases negative, wrought by so-called globalization. The opportunity resides in the quest to understand the other and to struggle together to build a better world. I only hope this book is taken as a gesture in support of that struggle.

James Brennan is one of those who believes in such collaboration across national borders and in the possibility that men and women of good faith can improve this terrible world we live in. He thought he saw something of interest in this book and expended great efforts to find a publisher interested in translating it. Most important, he himself accepted the most difficult part of the undertaking: to translate it. Jim is well known to professors and students in Argentina. We value his multilayered and comprehensive studies and also his personal qualities, his generosity and modesty, qualities that are sadly uncommon nowadays. I am deeply grateful to him.

Luis Alberto Romero
Buenos Aires, May 2001
"Luis Alberto Romero has written a book that is comprehensive, balanced, and full of insights into the development—and turmoil—of modern Argentine history. This book can serve as a starter for anyone interested in the topic. Specialists too will rely on it for its analysis and detail. James Brennan’s translation is outstanding."

—Jeremy Adelman, Princeton University

A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century, originally published in Buenos Aires in 1994, attained instantaneous status as a classic. Written as an introductory text for university students and the general public, it is a profound reflection on the “Argentine dilemma” and the challenges that the country faces as it tries to rebuild democracy. In the book, Romero painstakingly and brilliantly reconstructs and analyzes Argentina’s tortuous, often tragic modern history, from the “alluvial society” born of mass immigration, to the dramatic years of Juan and Eva Perón, to the recent period of military dictatorship and democracy. For this first English-language edition, Romero has written a new chapter covering the 1990s and a postscript addressing the economic and political upheavals of early 2002. A rare book combining great erudition with an engaging narrative, it is destined to be the standard English-language history of Argentina for many years to come.

The son of Argentina’s greatest twentieth-century historian, José Luis Romero, Luis Alberto Romero has emerged as one of the leading historians of his generation in Argentina. Romero’s generation is one that has witnessed the most dramatic decades of the country’s modern history, the decline of Argentina and its descent into violence, dictatorship, and despair, but also the hopeful if often difficult process of rebuilding democracy since the mid-1980s. Combining the rigor of the professional historian with a passionate commitment to his country’s future, Romero’s work is a major contribution to our understanding of one of Latin America’s most important nations. This translation by James Brennan, himself a leading English-speaking historian of Argentina, makes this valuable book available to a wide readership in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

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Front illustration: Evita and Perón speaking from the balcony of the Casa Rosada to their followers assembled in the Plaza de Mayo. (photo courtesy of Graciela Garcia Romero)