

## **THE PAST TWO HUNDRED ARGENTINEAN YEARS IN A SOCIOLOGICAL KEY AND ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS**

**Ricardo Sidicaro**\*

### **Abstract**

**This article systematizes a number of sociological explanations accounting for two hundred years of Argentinean institutional history. The analysis focuses on the difficulties to build up a democratic, stable, political order, which is why the key factors chosen only brush on individual protagonists. However, it is clear from the text that the period was characterized by the recurrent rise of personalist leaders who *produced* and were the *product* of the weaknesses shown by institutional structures. Alternation between periods of social mobilization and thwarting authoritarian reactions was another significant component of a political culture that seems to have begun to crack over the past two decades.**

In Argentina, the two hundred years that elapsed between May 1810 and the present did not result from a simple, linear evolution. At the date mentioned, the creation of a new nation-state was far from being an explicit goal; perhaps it was not even imagined. While the nation-states of the Old World were constructed along the lines of a relatively pre-established plan, since they succeeded the Ancien Regime, Argentina was launched from a highly uncertain platform. This brief paper will not dwell on facts or great characters, although both will occasionally be mentioned for the sake of illustration. Rather, my interest lies in proposing a number of sociological clues which I deem useful to understand the political and institutional development of two centuries. Neither will I offer a chronology of events that I assume to be

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\* Sociologist, CONICET researcher, and Research Secretary at the School of Social Sciences, Universidad de Buenos Aires, where he is a tenured Professor of Analysis of Argentine Society.

well known. There will be gaps in the sequence, for I have opted for a sociological arrangement based on explanatory concepts and mechanisms that I have chosen because of their relevance. Max Weber's interest in sociology was due to his belief that any explanation of history needed to resort to sociological categories. Émile Durkheim viewed history as a chief arena for rational experimentation. In his wisdom, Karl Marx established a totalizing idea that comprised all social sciences, putting to the test and enlarging on historical processes through his analyses. For the purpose of a sociological approach to two hundred years of Argentine history I have rested on the said authors and on more, recent others. The exercise involved can do without the pretext of a commemoration that, nevertheless, offers the possibility of broaching wide periods bearing in mind huge comparisons. Moreover, the indispensable requirement for the resulting thoughts is to dodge the traps of the surrounding brouhaha or covens as the case may be.

### **The beginnings**

A number of historians have thought of the May events as an action engineered by a small, intellectual, Jacobin elite whose leaders were under the influence of the Enlightenment. Regardless of whether such narrations are true to the facts, protagonic roles were attributed to the "great men" who were part of active minorities willing to construct political realities from their readings. In this regard, there stands out Mariano Moreno, who translated Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*. Gabriel Tarde would have interpreted this fact as a normal phenomenon, for he sustained that ideas, social behaviors, and fashions tend to spread at national or international levels. Without much conceptual detail, authors supporting very different if not opposed theoretical approaches frequently used the word "elite". Regardless of the evidence or basis submitted in such reflections and of the praise or criticism they garnered, references to elites or active minorities recurred in the analyses of dissimilar Argentine processes of political change. As was the case with other revolutions, the discussion about who actually protagonized the May events opened an erroneous, mutually exclusive choice between elites, classes, and the people (or "the crowd"). The assumption that there was an elite with firm convictions and the capacity of political leadership was not common to all the narratives. Neither was there agreement about popular participation in the May events. In an overall look, Mitre's gaze upon history best acknowledged the role played by economic factors in 1810. Marx had pointed out that speaking of social classes and their economic interests was not really his merit. Thinking of Guizot, he declared that bourgeois historians had dealt with the matter before him. Mitre, who had read Guizot, disseminated the theory of economic classes and the part they played in the emancipation from Spanish domination, presenting Rio de la Plata merchants as actors in a bourgeois revolution intent on breaking with Spanish monopoly. In due

time, Mitre's materialist explanations were incorporated into the official history, which kept emphasizing the role of the elites while in fact making them appear as the predecessors of the merchant classes. Nationalist historian Julio Irazusta's interpretation differed from Mitre's – Guizot's, but still underscored the economic factor. On exploring the May events, Irazusta viewed Moreno, the editor of *Representación de los hacendados*, as an advocate of free trade that benefited Buenos Aires' merchant classes, which claimed independence from Spain to start dealings with the British Empire<sup>1</sup>. It may prove striking that a materialist interpretation of Argentine history may have prevailed to the extent of becoming the discourse taught at our schools. This is due not only to intellectual economicist trends but also to the poor capacity of the first local upper classes to formulate hegemonic ideologies capable of appealing to social emotions through more heroic narratives. The fact remains that they were bound to think of the use of force to resolve conflicts rather than of integrative consensus.

Socialist Party founder Juan B. Justo also gave due importance to social classes as actors defined by their structural insertion in the economy. From a Marxist stance, yet aware that explanations based on economic factors proved insufficient, Justo made a point of the diversity of the individuals who, from the streets, accompanied the establishment of our first national authorities:

“Thus on May 25, 1810, while 200 hundred ‘prominent, most respectable neighbors’, as recorded in the documents of the times, took a decisive step along the road of independence, no more than 100 ordinary men shared in the excitement. In Mitre's words, they were ‘manolos’ whom French, ‘a popular agent of Belgrano’, had brought from the del Alto neighborhood, and ‘more fearless citizens’ brought by Berutti, ‘a popular agent of Rodríguez Peña’. Such were the people that cheered the Junta and, according to López, ‘cheered’ to the tune of the second-line leaders of the revolution”.<sup>2</sup>

Justo's narrative included relevant data recorded by Bartolomé Mitre in his book *La historia de Belgrano*. In clear, plain words, the records described those who unknowingly pioneered the engineering of public gatherings aiming at legitimizing political leaders. José M. Ramos Mejía took a leap along the lines of enunciation of popular protagonism in *Las multitudes argentinas*. He referred to the very pages of Mitre's book cited by Justo but, inspired by Gustave Le Bon's theories, Ramos Mejía highlighted the presence of a crowd that, in the face of the Junta's hesitation to oust the viceroy, invaded the public arena when

“A dull murmur of discontent spread into the suburbs and a surge of people whom no one had called or addressed made its way through the

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<sup>1</sup> Julio Irazusta. *Influencia británica en el Río de la Plata*. Buenos Aires, EUDEBA, 1984, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Juan B. Justo. *Socialismo*. Buenos Aires, Librería de la Vanguardia, 1920, p. 22.

city streets and squares (...) Danger quickly resulted in a crowd gathering together...”<sup>3</sup>.

Indeed, through an interpretative maneuver, Justo’s and Mitre’s ‘manolos’ had become vigilant, active social supporters of the new path. In a barely perceptible manner, they founded an egalitarian, political social bond:

“The uncouth, happy to be at long last on a first-name basis with the mare and with the *superior, honest man*, had acquired self-confidence and gained awareness of their worth...”<sup>4</sup>.

In 1898, Ernesto Quesada wrote a sociological interpretation of the conflicts aroused by the initiatives of those who believed in the possibility of turning an administrative viceroyalty – today we would say that its unity did not go beyond a document – into a republic. This national project was bound to clash with the interests and ideas of others that would not readily give up the authority of the self-governed regions into the hands of a central government<sup>5</sup>. Over and above contradictory explanations, the confrontation between centralist *Unitarios* and *Federales* marked the first great national division whose diverse manifestations have lasted until our times. The multiple versions of this conflict gave rise to the notion of two co-existing countries long before sociology introduced the issue of dual structuralism and the problems involved in the transition from a traditional to a modern society. Disputes over material interests and political and institutional pronouncements ended in a cycle of violence, most successfully projected by Sarmiento in his famous dichotomy between *civilization and barbarism*. A passionate character with analytical aspirations, Sarmiento delved into the political and intellectual combinations of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His political objective was to establish a bond between Facundo and Rosas, with the *barbarian* interior rising to power in Buenos Aires and hindering the march toward *civilization*. *Facundo* was the first great sociological depiction of what could be considered, in a Durkheimian fashion, the resistance posed by the mechanic solidarity of the pastoral interior when confronted with the oncoming organic solidarity of the mercantile city-port. When Rosas’s opponents succeeded in imposing their projects of institutional organization, they showed how *things* were done through words or ideas. In order to prevent the return of *barbarism* they implemented migration policies that would change the composition of the population. The performative force of the motto *ruling means populating* came true with the arrival of the foreign migrants who, according to Juan Bautista Alberdi, would bring along the industrious spirit of Europe. In keeping with the positivist thought of the times, they believed that was the fastest, most effective way to import progress.

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<sup>3</sup> José M. Ramos Mejía. *Las multitudes argentinas*. Buenos Aires, Editorial de Belgrano, 1977, p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Ib-ídem.

<sup>5</sup> Quesada, Ernesto: *La época de Rosas*, Buenos Aires, Instituto de Investigaciones de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires [Research Institute at Buenos Aires University School of Philosophy and Letters], 1926, ch. 2.

In the *L'Année Sociologique* magazine, Vol. V (1900-1901), Émile Durkheim wrote a brief comment about an article by P. Sitta entitled “La popolazione della Repubblica Argentina”<sup>6</sup> (published in the *Rivista Italiana Di Socologia*, Volume IV, fascicle 3, pp. 310-335). Drawing on the information given, Durkheim wrote that

“from a demographic point of view, what is interesting about the Argentine Republic is the huge number of foreign immigrants (25 %) in the overall population. This fundamental characteristic implies others, such as the striking predominance of men, a considerable percentage of whom are between 20 and 40 years of age, a small number of families but a high birth rate among both natives and immigrants (more than 4 children per married woman). Thus the Argentine people’s demographic constitution is quite particular, and its influence is necessarily felt in the general development of their history”<sup>7</sup>.

The French founder of sociology could have written at further length, saying that a society of such sociodemographic characteristics was bound to experience significant anomia and serious social integration problems. In addition to the fast population growth and the difficulty in creating family ties, Durkheim could have mentioned other data that can’t have been recorded by his sources. I mean the exploitation of wage earners without the umbrella of a protective legislation like the one Europe was beginning to implement. Lack of legislation worsened the “pathological” effects of the social division of labor. Likewise, from a Durkheimian perspective, it was relevant to notice the consequences of a modernizing process based on the need to steer away from Spanish traditions. At the same time, the new project called for the laicization of education, a critique of sociability forms practiced in the interior (viewed as archaic), and the stigmatization of the aboriginal population. While it did not prove difficult to establish Jules Ferry’s school system in the documents, it was rather more complicated to apply it in a totally different sociohistorical milieu. At the start of the Third Republic, Durkheim had contributed to create the said school system in France. Its purpose lay in strengthening social integration, instilling collective representations in accordance with the notion of democratic citizenship, and encouraging patriotic values. In a less ambitious fashion, our local school system aimed at imbuing national feelings into the offspring of international migration; i.e. to produce Argentineans, a hard goal to achieve as long as the official discourse had very little contact with the popular classes and did not offer them hegemonic political proposals because they were excluded from the right to vote. On the other hand, the anomic effects of upward social mobility for some and the concomitant frustration of the majority could

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<sup>6</sup> Published in the *Rivista Italiana Di Socologia*, Volume IV, fascicle 3, pp. 310-335.

<sup>7</sup> Émile Durkheim. *L'Année Sociologique* (1900-1901). Paris, Alcan. Reproduced in Émile Durkheim: *Journal Sociologique*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1969, p. 385.

not be made up for, as happened in Europe, with calls to patriotism that drove national identities to hate or distrust the aliens who, at the other side of the frontier, coveted the lands and envied the lot of those who had been born in France, Germany, England, and so forth. It is quite likely that many of the immigrants' disregard for national values drove them to leave their native countries in anticipation of wars, *pro patria mori* not being their motto. There were also those who had emigrated to get rich and expected to take their new wealth back to their places of origin, so the "advantages" of their offspring's eventual patriotism was lost on them. Anyway, most immigrants kept up their ancestral culture only through typical dishes and songs. Coming from countries fragmented by deeply rooted local differences, many discovered that in Argentina they were not Calabrians, Neapolitans, or Sicilians but Italians, as was stated in their passports. Censuses and administrative procedures turned Galicians, Basques, and Sevillians into Spaniards. An extreme case that justifies repetition of terms was that of Germans coming from the Volga region. It was difficult to acknowledge their German status in Germany, since their forefathers had long migrated to Russia. However, in view of international classification, Argentina recorded them as Germans. Finally, a number of migrants lacked a national history, whether because of hazy boundaries, itinerant origins, or changing/vanished nationalities in countries that had ceased to exist as such.

### **The first economic globalization**

Argentina took part in the first globalization (1870-1914) by admitting flows of migrants expelled from Europe and by advantageously sharing in the world food trade. Both these features prefigured changes in the country's social composition. The arrival of foreigners in large numbers contributed to a rise in the population rate while the international demand for farming products boosted rural production. Many have declared that the decisive factor in the competitiveness of our exports lay in the extraordinary fertility of the Pampas. Poets and writers, on their part, sang the praises of our livestock and grains. In 1894, over the Atlantic, Max Weber wondered about the true reasons underlying the low prices of Argentine products that endangered German cereal production. He did not focus on natural agronomic factors. Weber had little information to think of an answer; his main sources were a few letters by German settlers who, from Argentina, wrote ethnographic descriptions about labor, hiring, and lodging of rural workers in Entre Ríos' agricultural colonies. He also gathered some quantitative data from the late 1893 issue of the *Review of the River Plate*. Weber's reflection on Argentina<sup>8</sup> was consistent with his studies on the conditions of rural workers east of the river Elba. He had by now drawn important conclusions about the relations between modes of labor and political-and-institutional forms of organization. According to Weber, Argentina's comparative

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<sup>8</sup> Max Weber. "Empresas rurales de colonos argentinos", in *Sociedad. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* # 6. Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires University School of Social Sciences, 1995, pp. 170 to 184.

advantages in the international grain trade stemmed from overexploitation of seasonal workers housed in unhealthy shacks and with no social protection laws. Competitive price forming was also due to the volatility of the local currency. In Weber's analysis, monetary depreciation favored the trade system through lower payments to producers who, in turn, cut their losses by paying lower wages. Following his findings in the Elba region, Weber insisted that the uprooting experienced by rural workers hindered the construction of such social bonds as were needed to mold modern institutions in the nation-states. Preoccupied about his country's interests, Weber deemed it impossible to compete with Argentine grain exports unless Germany engaged in the following:

“To bring down rather than bring up the nature of our social structure and cultural level until we reach the levels of a semi-barbarian, low-density population like Argentina's”<sup>9</sup>.

Five years earlier, on reviewing a book about general aspects of Argentine reality, Weber had declared that the lack of measures to integrate immigrants into the native population did not contribute to improve their “hopelessly disorganized political life”<sup>10</sup>. A few lines of *Economy and Society* summarized the characteristics of Latin American party leaders, emphasizing outstanding lucrative features that motivated them.

“In the former Spanish colonies it is always about access to the State's manger in which the winners seek nourishment, whether through the so-called ‘elections’ or the so-called ‘revolutions’”<sup>11</sup>.

Probably Weber found his sources about South America in his readings of James Bryce. The German sociologist did not preach political morality, and his writings about the issue realistically systematized the characteristics of the systems that represented his time. Indeed, the actors that sought *to live off politics* either in Argentina or in Latin America were no exception. Their distinctive features may have derived from generalized situations of poorly institutionalized representation mechanisms that drew attention to these leaders' unwillingness to pretend that they acted on behalf of acceptably significant social interests. Foreign observers of Argentine political life knew that there were leaders who lived off politics as they advocated democratic control. They viewed such control as a means to access their own factual and symbolic benefit although, in the case under study, observers came across self-contained groups. These stood for an “oligarchy” that did not find its justification in class prestige and that shut the general population off the electoral arena in open contradiction with the republican principles that it boasted of while hampering their implementation.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Max Weber. “Empresas rurales de colonos argentinos”, in *Sociedad. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* # 6. *Op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber. *Economía y sociedad. Esbozo de sociología comprensiva*. México, Editorial Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999, pp.1079 and 1080.

José Nicolás Matienzo, who should be honored as the great Argentine pioneer of studies in political sociology and who was also familiar with Bryce's works, frequented the political class and condensed its characteristics in a paragraph that is probably a must-cite for those who sought information about the power elite one hundred years after the May events.

“Rulers are recruited among citizens who, although not actually members of a caste, constitute a leading class relatively easy to access. Party leaders and other political directors are members of this class. (...) Its members have fairly close social and political bonds and naturally share views and sentiments about the reasons and purposes for collective and individual behavior. Were it not for their common morality, it would be impossible for them to exchange services and favors regardless of political affiliation”<sup>12</sup>.

### **A hundred years later, the political and institutional system and the changes it underwent**

Foreign observers made stark descriptions of our political life. Spaniard Adolfo Posada was probably the first international sociologist who delved into Argentine problems from a global perspective. His interest in politics drove him to devote a significant part of his book *La República Argentina* (1912) to the subject. He must have listened to optimistic official opinions as well as to opponents' extreme criticism when he traveled to Argentina around the Centennial. The spiritualist outlook of his Krausist training must have prevented him from falling into the reductionism of those who believed that economic growth would favor the modernization of all social practices, including politics. It is likely that his arguments may have been influenced mostly by *El régimen republicano federal*, just published by José Nicolás Matienzo. Posadas described the mechanisms that supported the power system by saying that there was

“A political oligarchy following the tradition of the “bosses” or local political bosses that today serve an oligarchy resting upon a financial or economic infrastructure. Such oligarchy is born full of energy, following the disappearance of the rather generous and romantic political thought of the likes of Sarmiento and Mitre, replaced by Pellegrini's economic notions. Obsessed and conceited owing to the power of production, the number of its banking houses, the noise of its trains and the giddy activity of its ports, the formation of the ethical and the political nucleus, with the former acting as a political break and the latter breathing life

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<sup>12</sup> Matienzo, José Nicolás; *El régimen republicano-federal*, Buenos Aires, Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación [National Secretariat of Culture], 1994, p. 218.



into effective politics, has been unable to keep up with the economic process”<sup>13</sup>.

Posadas’ reflection upon political leadership emphasized the dictatorial personality cult of presidents who controlled decisions about public affairs above the Legislature, thus violating federalism. The Spanish sociologist found that the more general causes of such behavior lay in the weakness of civic traditions and in the lack of a true ethical reaction on the part of the masses. He said that these were composed of a large number of foreigners whose preoccupation focused on material issues and who were not interested in politics. In regard to the choice of authorities, Posada drew on Matienzo’s study about the oligarchic habit of electing the highest national and provincial authorities as well as the legislators that were supposed to represent the interests of the society<sup>14</sup>. Speaking of the weightier criteria for legislators to access candidacies for the national or provincial Legislature, Matienzo pointed out that governors’ friends and family had the better chances. On the other hand, those who upheld the Constitution and lived frugally were cast aside. In compensation, they were granted University chairs insofar as they did not use them to interfere with militant politics<sup>15</sup>.

Many explanations have been offered about the Sáenz Peña Law and the end of restricted political participation. Electoral democratization and its almost immediate political consequences were generally thought to mean the defeat of the oligarchic system by the *Partido Radical*. This party proposed that the political system open up, and the more modern conservative sectors agreed. In this sense, there was a high-consensus modernization process involving political and institutional structures. If compared to the democratization of European countries, Argentina launched non-gradual electoral participation, and based its corresponding laws on the most advanced legislation of the times. One variable that influenced the said liberalization may have been the fact that a large percentage of the poorest sectors of the population were foreigners and therefore not entitled to vote. While there were complaints and even revolutionary attempts that claimed for clean elections, these demands were not related to the interests of any given social sector but focused on political claims for the free exercise of citizenship rights. After 1916 it became clear that, even when the social background of leaders

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<sup>13</sup> Adolfo Posada. *La República Argentina*. Buenos Aires, Ediciones Hyspamerica, 1986, p. 213.

<sup>14</sup> On this issue, Posada quoted from Matienzo’s book: “If one were to draw a divide between the president’s and the governors’ prerogatives in electoral matters, I think it would be accurate to say that, on the whole, each of the said authorities appoints his successors. In other words, the incoming president is chosen by the outgoing president just as every provincial governor is appointed by the one whose term of office is over. Along the same lines, the governors behave as absolute lords in regard to provincial elective positions. Thus, with very few exceptions, Legislatures are the governors’ creatures. With respect to federal elective positions [representatives and Senators in Congress] (...), governors play the role of managers of a business in which they are the main stockholders, though they acknowledge the president’s more or less important participation. This depended on political convenience; i.e. the extent to which the governor needs presidential support to stay in office”. José Nicolás Matienzo, *op. cit.*, p. 154, and Adolfo Posada, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>15</sup> José Nicolás Matienzo. *Op. cit.*, p. 155.

from the *Partido Radical* did not differ much from that of their conservative counterparts, the differences between them lay in their electorate. The middle classes by far sympathized with the *radicales*. However, the social composition of the *radicales* did not weigh as heavily as the fact that their middle class nature became manifest in their lesser attachment to the ideological traditionalism of their governmental performance as compared with previous administrations. An outstanding feature of the multi-discourse that Gino Germani dubbed “liberal populism” was the enunciation of the dichotomy *the people versus the oligarchy*. At the beginning, this appeared exclusively as a conflict among actors in the political arena, but it gradually acquired economic and social meanings. In principle, as has been so often pointed out, the ruling policies of the *radicales* were balanced with the boundaries of the economic model implemented during Conservative administrations. However, the wider political participation introduced increasing social mobility not only for the middle classes but also for the working classes. A political culture based on personality cult relentlessly persisted over the almost fifteen years of successive *radical* administrations, contributing to a lack of major programmatic definitions in all political parties. While the division between Yrigoyen’s supporters and opponents mirrored conflictive options and social insertion, the public factor that divided *radicalismo* was the personality cult. During the 1929 world crisis, the State, whose control had not so far been essential to the interests of the dominant economic sectors, became an indispensable factor to ensure their gains

In *Autoritarismo, fascismo y populismo nacional*<sup>16</sup>, Gino Germani’s most modern book made a conceptual innovation of fascism in the light of what transpired in Argentina between 1930 and 1976. He posited that the six military coups of those years should be understood as fascist attempts or functional fascist makeshifts aiming to thwart society’s political involvement and revert the citizenry’s increasing intervention in public affairs. According to Germani, while European fascisms were strongly supported by the middle classes because they dreaded the advance of the Left and the working classes, in Argentina it fell to the pro-coup military to confront and neutralize the threat of popular protagonism. The 1930 coup intended to put down leftist unionism and progressive political forces and cultural actors, but internal division among the military ended up in a new political combination that raised the mobilization and participation of the popular sectors to unprecedented levels. *Peronismo* granted new social rights to vast sectors of the population and created a collective imaginary that the movement’s detractors lived as a threat. Likewise, the 1955 coup was meant as a functional alternative to fascism, focusing its efforts on the suppression of activity by the workers’ movement. In 1962, the coup also aimed to deal a blow on social mobilization, which they basically though not exclusively identified with *peronismo*. In 1966 the Armed Forces sought a long-term

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<sup>16</sup> Gino Germani. *Autoritarismo, fascismo y populismo nacional*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Temas, 2003.

cancellation of all channels of political participation, announcing new, non-democratic forms of representation. The 1976 coup, much more violent and repressive than the previous ones, was intended to dismantle the political and social activist structures. The so-called *Proceso* was a more successful fascist attempt than were the five others that preceded it. Resorting to extreme violence, it destroyed the structures and organizations involved in social participation.

### **After the *Proceso***

The 1983 rupture in our national political history did not automatically modify the modes of action employed by party leaders. The very idea of the transition calls for a question about the subjects of change in order to avoid confusion between the establishment of democratic rules and the actors' effective steps to implement them. Contextually, the 1983 starting point was not ideally suited to put an end to the dictatorial era. As Juan Linz points out, democratic regimes that come into office without experiencing violent ruptures or confrontations with the preceding dictatorships find it difficult to undertake political depuration, modify legislation, or restructure the State to rid it of the traces left by the previous mode of dominance<sup>17</sup>. In the Argentine case, such disadvantages grew worse because of the political parties' lack of democratic experience. The 1983 elections rekindled the political divisions of earlier times; it seemed as if the deep changes that occurred between 1976 and 1983 had not been acknowledged. The social anti-militarist restlessness failed to be channeled by the dated political machinery and its leaders who, in a truly *closing* operation in the Weberian sense, preferred not to incorporate into their damaged party organizations the large number of citizens interested in participating in democratic life. In Pierre Bourdieu's sociological perspective of structural constructivism, the notion of *habitus* is the heuristic tool that best grasps the incorporation of history or experience into the practice of agents in whatever field. In the process under study, it renders intelligible the meaning of party leaders who, when the democratic era began, maintained the practices that they had resorted to in the repeated collapses of democracy. Their choice was not due to either a conspiracy or to a conscious agreement between them. Rather, following Bourdieu, it expressed the *habitus* or "systems of lasting, transferable dispositions; structured structures ready to work as structuring structures; i.e. as principles that may generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their goals without assuming a conscious purpose related to certain ends or the deliberate control of the necessary operations to achieve such ends. These dispositions are objectively 'regulated' and 'regular', not at all the outcome of compliance with predetermined rules and therefore collectively orchestrated but not the result of

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<sup>17</sup> Juan Linz. *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University, 1978, p. 35.

the organizing work produced by an orchestra conductor”<sup>18</sup>. In his register, Matienzo would have said that it was the shared morality of the political class that operated in 1983.

If in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the oligarchic political culture had been expressed through personalism and parties lacking a program, its justification lay in the relative absence of politically demanding social sectors. However, as from the 1910s, first the liberal populism of the *radicales* and then the national-and-popular populism of the *peronistas* showed that the people were willing to participate in politics. Their readiness had to be thwarted through military action as a functional surrogate for fascism. As from 1983, the main factor that blocked the citizenry’s political participation was the political culture of parties rather than that of the society. Clientelism and nepotism, personalistic favoritism, and adaptation strategies of minor leaders created a set of actions and conditions whose weakening did not imply that they could be easily overcome. Moreover, the social fragmentation resulting from the *Proceso* and deepened by neoliberalism did not give rise to contexts that favored collective hopes. Antimilitarism was a spontaneous outcome of the outrage that swept away the population’s earlier neutrality to military coups.

Beginning in December 2001, the basic features of society’s distrust of party leadership and reflexive frustration at the functioning of the political system have lasted to this day. *Us (citizens) versus them (the political class)* summarized the estrangement between very dissimilar social sectors and political parties. The citizenry’s critical stance resulted in internal crises inside the parties, and this weakened their leadership and brought about division. Thus the so far never actually solid party system began to crumble and there was a proliferation of attempts at creating social organizations in which groups and individuals resenting lack of solutions to specific problems sought self-representation. Amid the crisis, personalism in electoral struggles increased, the chambers of Parliament lost prestige, political parties again behaved as province federations, and the regulative principle was the practice of interested, partisan exchanges. Adolfo Posada’s and José Nicolás Matienzo’s analyses came strictly true.

Arbitrarily picked candidates, manipulation of the electorate, and unrepresentative legislators and high officials at national, provincial, and municipal levels became the rule. So did reports of corruption, the difference with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century being that now the citizenry had grown much more demanding. In political parties, the rate of distrust, which had reached its peak in 2001, showed a negligible decrease, and in the last decade of these two hundred years remains around 93-94 %<sup>19</sup>.

### **Closing with an open ending**

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bourdieu. *El sentido práctico*. Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI Editores, 2007, p. 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Barómetro de la Deuda Social Argentina.. Observatorio de la Deuda Social Argentina. Departamento de Investigación Institucional de la Universidad Católica Argentina # 5*. Buenos Aires, 2009, ch. 7.

In most of the countries that aspired to consolidate their republican institutions, political life at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an arena for struggles to keep or obtain positions of power by rehearsing the newly acquired rules. The political regimes of the countries that had reached the highest levels of social, economic, and cultural development were not democratic according to the present sense of the term. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, proscription of German socialists showed the constraints imposed on parties that represented the working classes. In practically every country, universal suffrage was achieved through claims that not always succeeded in every aspect. Changes toward institutional stability stemmed from slow, painful, sometimes contradictory innovations that gradually created democratic coexistence and respect for citizens' rights. It need not be emphasized that this process was at times interrupted by fascist regressions. The difference between the beginnings of Argentina's political development and that of Europe lay, among other considerations, in the lack of what Arno Mayer called the persistent effects of the Ancien Régime; namely, a combination between economic changes resulting from economic progress and the gradual disappearance, in the political scenario, of aristocratic influences and of the *dignitaries* who influenced the beginnings of democratic pluralism in a variety of ways. England, the most stable of European democracies, built its political system from what Joseph Schumpeter called "an active symbiosis" between the old established classes and the rising bourgeoisie. The French Revolution and its Jacobin elite made an abrupt break with the past, but the vestiges of the monarchy (restorations and Napoleonic authoritarianism included), hampered the advance of democracy and, in a way, smoothed the intensity of the changes. England still keeps its monarchic system and it took France a century to come to terms with the 1789 Revolution.

The estimated population of Argentina in 1810 was about six hundred thousand people, few of whom were able to constitute the citizenry's public opinion. The active minorities that, at the beginning, took upon themselves the representation of the society knowingly or otherwise established an elitist system that boasted a republican discourse. Such articulation was destined to last in our national political culture. The interregnums –first the Anarchy and then Rosas's period –added personalistic components and plebiscitarian trends that also became permanent. The 1912 democratic inclusion of more citizens into the electorate was viewed by many as the starting point of a normalization process which, as had been the case in Europe, was expected to facilitate the passage toward a peaceful, organized system of alternation of power. However, it was soon nipped by the military coup, the functional substitute for fascism. The subsequent, repeated military interventions introduced new factors of political disorganization in a general context of social, economic, and cultural modernization. At the time of the Centennial, Joaquín V. González finished his *Juicio del Siglo* [The Century on Trial] with contradictory and partly hopeful expectations. The phrase "two hundred years" in the title of this article was a device to

avoid the use of the word Bicentennial, for it invites celebration and encourages to think of fantasies based on biographical illusions derived from some kind of essential nature. Speaking in a sociological key announced an inscription into a discipline that necessarily shuns reassuring endings and leaves the reader to wonder about the future.

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