

**Forum: Nation: M. von Thüngen: Historical Revisionism, Nation,
and Representations of the Past in Contemporary Argentina**
by Maximiliano von Thüngen

*In memory of Tulio Halperín Donghi (1926-2014),
for his legacy, so unconventional and always stimulating*

Introduction

The present forum is cause for reflecting on a theme that is as pressing today as it was yesterday: that of the nation and its role in the collective imaginary of present-day societies. It is a theme particularly topical in Latin America, where the construction of nations seems to be—if we observe the never-ending day-to-day political disputes throughout the region—an unfinished project. The social conflicts and violence that seem to have emerged strongly twenty years after the turn of the 21st century invite us to reflect on the development of the national projects written by Latin American intellectual and political elites during the foundation of national states in the second half of the 19th century. To focus on one example, and because of the leading role Argentinian intellectuals played in some of these debates during the 20th and 21st centuries, this essay centers on the case of Argentina.

The year 1810 traditionally marks the beginning of the revolution that led the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata—a huge territory that included and exceeded modern Argentina, guided by Buenos Aires City—to separate themselves from Spain. After six years of war against the old „mother country“, Argentinian independence was formally signed during the Congress of Tucumán in 1816. However, that year did not mark peace but saw the continuation of civil war along with the struggle for independence, which lasted for almost two decades and ravaged the territory and its population. It was not until the 1830s that Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877), governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, managed to build a centralized political authority through harsh political repression. After the end of his long

government in 1852, the National Constitution was sanctioned which, with some modifications, is still in force today.

Ever since the mid-19th century, the nation has regularly appeared throughout Argentina's political and intellectual debates, in the demonization of certain social sectors and the idealization of others, and in the legitimation and the disqualification of various projects and plans in the country. It drew on deliberately vague definitions, which avoided specifying their contents and identified the nation with its „people“ (*el pueblo*). But at times, the imagined nation was and has been constructed through concrete political programs, conceived to surmount certain turbulent realities. Such was the objective of the propositions set forth by Juan Bautista Alberdi and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in the mid-19th century. Both intellectuals-cum-politicians, exiled during the government of Juan Manuel de Rosas, debated at length the question of what kind of political and economic system Argentina should adopt after what they defined as the tyranny of Rosas. Alberdi's liberal thought, particularly *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República Argentina* (Bases and starting points for the political organisation of the Argentine Republic), written in 1852, had a direct influence on the writing of the Constitution of 1853. Sarmiento, on the other hand, had little intellectual influence on the constitution but held the presidency of the country between 1868 and 1874. From that position, he was able to carry out many of his political ideas, among other fields in popular education. During these decades there was a relative consensus around the ideas of classical liberalism, shared with some differences between Sarmiento and Alberdi. The First World War ended the consensus and the idea that Argentina should adopt a liberal system of government that had prevailed for decades among the ruling elites.

Throughout the 20th and into the 21st century, leading political groups and social sectors have tried to impose their own definition of the nation in tandem with society. Social conflict, at moments resembling a latent civil war—as Halperín described it—has remained

a constant in the Argentine history of the 20th and 21st centuries.¹ My essay aims to reconstruct different ideals which, from the mid-19th century onwards, have shaped the understanding of the nation, hoping to discover the precise elements in those visions that have persisted over the decades to contemporary society. Among these various views, I focus on two. The first is the liberal view, instated as an official ideology by Argentina's political elites in the second half of the 19th century. Liberal historiography, inaugurated by Bartolomé Mitre in his *Historia de Belgrano y de la independencia Argentina* (History of Belgrano and of Argentine independence; 1859), dominated most of the institutional and political spaces and was reproduced in national celebrations and school programs. The second current is the revisionist, originally antidemocratic and nationalistic, which evolved in the shadow of the world economic and political crisis of the 1930s, a decade that seemed to spell the death of liberalism.

Most revisionist historians do and did not come from the field of academic historiography. Almost all were lawyers, journalists, and writers by profession who graduated from the University of Buenos Aires. Although the revisionist interpretations were never accepted by academic historiography, both for their methodological shortcomings and their high ideological charge, they have gained a lasting hold on the Argentine imaginary and today constitute a sort of „historical common sense.“ This success derives from the ability of revisionism to explain the relations between past and present simply and moralistically and to merge history and politics. In times of strong political and social conflict during the 20th century, this gesture was welcomed by a public opinion that was well-disposed to judge the liberal project, which at the end of 19th century no one had seriously questioned, as a mistake. As we shall see, most revisionists have had less interest in understanding the past than in finding in it the keys to explaining the causes for the political and economic decline of Argentina in the 1930s.

¹Tulio Halperín Donghi, *Argentina en el callejón* (Argentina in the alley), Buenos Aires 1995.

A Nationless State

Over the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, Argentina experienced rapid economic growth based on its entry into the world economy as a commodities exporter and capital importer. Three factors made that integration possible. The first was the state's new control over vast terrains, populated by indigenous peoples whom the political elite regarded as unproductive. After the long decades of civil war, the Argentine state adopted a new policy of „civilizing“ by enforcing the infamous „Conquest of the Desert“ in 1879, a policy deemed urgent for the nascent nation-state.²

Through a violent military campaign, the indigenous peoples of southern Argentina were exterminated or displaced from their territories and subjected to national authority. Their spoils—weapons, clothes and artifacts of daily use, and also some corpses—were deposited in museums and exhibited as an expression of a distant past, a prehistory of the nation. The representation of indigenous lands as an unpopulated and unproductive desert was fixed lastingly in the Argentine national identity.

The second factor was the massive influx of immigrants, who between 1870 and 1914 arrived on Argentine soil to work as land labourers, enabling the country's economic growth. This was justified by the supposed „emptiness“ of Argentine land, which demanded populating with newly arrived immigrants from Europe. The image of Argentina as a country that descended from ships was promoted by public education throughout the 20th century.

Third, capital, for the most part British, supported the construction of refrigeration systems for the export of beef and the extension of rail lines which, from the fertile lands of the Pampas (the heart of the grain economy), converged at the port of Buenos Aires City and connected the country's interior with the Atlantic economy. In this way, Argentina entered an international trade system geared toward

²Tulio Halperín Donghi, *Una nación para el desierto argentino* (One nation for the Argentine desert), Buenos Aires 2005.

meeting the needs of the European countries which, toward the end of the 19th century, underwent a stepped-up process of industrialization. This pattern remained in effect until the 1930 economic crisis, bringing Argentina a period of prosperity that would never be repeated.

The system of government that went along with this accelerated economic growth was that of an oligarchic regime, which barred most of society from effective participation in politics.³ The scant popular legitimacy on which this order was founded was not, in the last decades of the 19th century, an overly alarming fact. In the mentality of the governing elites, Argentina was destined for a glorious horizon toward which they had to lead it. Few voices, then, questioned the aptness or advisability of the economic model thanks to which Argentina had known three decades of uninterrupted growth. The blame the revisionists retrospectively heaped on this model, or the more substantial efforts Raúl Prebisch made later in 1949 to demonstrate the structural frailty of an export economy like Argentina's, with a scarcely developed industry highly dependent upon the international prices of the products it exported, were almost unknown critiques before the Great Depression.⁴

At the same time, the state, now the undisputed arbiter of the social order, devised a national pedagogy to educate its citizens. The Argentines were educated in public, popular-level schools, where they learned dates and native symbols that differed from those in Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil. Nevertheless, if at the end of the 19th century the state seemed to be fully constructed, the same could not be said for the Argentine nation. The shape of the nation was not determined by the political visions of Alberdi or Sarmiento, but rather by the power of economic growth and political and social processes that escaped the control of the local elites.

Thus, at the end of the 19th century, the liberal nation was an unfinished project, even as many of the elements ascribed to it seem to

³Natalio Botana, *El orden conservador* (The conservative order), Buenos Aires 1977.

⁴Raúl Prebisch, *The economic development of Latin America and its principal problems*, in: *Economic Bulletin for Latin America* 2 (1962), 1, pp. 1-22.

have entered in lasting form into the Argentine imaginary. These elements include a set interpretation of the Argentine past, among them the idea that after the end of Rosas' Government in 1852, the period of „National Organization“ began with its first step of sanctioning a constitution in 1853. This document was an expression of liberal principles, among which was the concern for the problems of political representation, the protection of individual rights and freedoms, and the importance of limiting government power.⁵ The work of Juan B. Alberdi was the main influence on the drafting of that first constitution.⁶ In the liberal historiography of the late 19th century, Argentine history was conceived as a slow progression toward the final consolidation of the nation-state that—following this interpretation—had emerged in the revolution of 1810. Bartolomé Mitre managed with great success to install this interpretation of the past in his work *History of Belgrano*, an interpretation that also proposed a pantheon of heroes and a list of national dates key to the construction of the nation: the beginning of the revolution (25 May 1810) and the Declaration of Independence (9 July 1816), among others. Although that liberal narrative has, to the present day, barely been reformulated, alternative readings of the past emerged in the first decades of the 20th century, much in line with new plans for the nation.

Mass Democracy and the Crisis of Liberalism (1912-1930)

The introduction of universal suffrage and the establishment of a democratic regime through the Sáenz Peña Law in 1912 led to the coming to power in 1916 of the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR, Radical Civic Union), headed by Dr. Hipólito Yrigoyen. The „people“, long barred from elections, exercised their right to a universal vote—at least, for men above 18—which was secret and compulsory. The electoral

⁵Hilda Sabato, *El pensamiento de Bartolomé Mitre y los liberales* (The Thought of Bartolomé Mitre and the Liberals), Buenos Aires 2009, p. 12.

⁶Ezequiel Gallo, *Las ideas liberales en la Argentina*, in: Aníbal Iturrieta (ed.), *El pensamiento político argentino contemporáneo*, Buenos Aires 1994, pp. 151-176, here, p. 154.

landscape, together with the populist and nationalist leadership of Dr. Yrigoyen—who identified only his followers as the people and presented himself as the nation's sole possible leader—bred fears in the traditional political class, which was mindful that democracy would take the country along uncertain paths.

The 1920s and 1930s were not favorable for democratic experiments. The crisis of liberalism in Europe and Latin America opened up bright perspectives for the most varied trends in nationalistic, antiliberal, and antidemocratic thinking. The Russian Revolution, Italian fascism, and Miguel Primo de Rivera's dictatorship in Spain strengthened antiliberal ideologies. In Argentina, these new ideas and ideologies did not completely displace the liberal ones, strongly rooted in the country's political traditions since 1850, but had a major impact on the different variants of nationalist thinking. Meanwhile, the German Historical School (*Historische Schule der Nationalökonomie*), favoring a more active intervention of the state in the economy, gained influence in national politics.⁷ On another level, the influence of the reactionary Charles Maurras (1868-1952) invited the people to imagine a society based on Catholicism, opposed to the values preached by the French Revolution.

In Argentina, many leaders quickly tired of the brief experiment with democracy and supported the 1930 coup d'état of General Uriburu who, inspired by overseas examples, hoped to destroy the liberal tradition that had taken root and reorganise society along a corporatist model. Under Uriburu's martial rule, Argentina entered the tempestuous 1930s. General Uriburu, without adequate support for his overly innovative political plans, was ousted from national leadership by General Justo, who, as a remedy against democratic openness, promptly perpetrated systematic, undisguised electoral fraud.

If republican democracy seemed to be breathing out its last sigh in the political milieu, in the field of economics, another last sigh came from the agro-export model. For export-based Argentina, the

collapse of international trade had immediate effects that exposed the structural fragility of its economic model. Abruptly deprived of its European markets, Argentina seemed unable to adapt to a world in which free trade was a thing of the past. But the new government did not give up the model that had assured Argentina a place in the world. This context explains the signing in 1933 of the Roca-Runciman Pact between Argentina and Great Britain. In it, the British government committed itself to continue to import refrigerated meat in exchange for guarantees of broad advantages for British interests, which, among other items, controlled the meat refrigerating plants for the exports. The pact roused fierce debates among contemporaries and was perceived by much of society as a selling out of national interests. As an example of the political violence this instigated, in a fierce debate in the Senate, Lisandro de la Torre spoke out against the likely consequences of the agreement, and in an effort to shield him from a hired gunman, his fellow Santa Fe senator Enzo Bordabehere was shot to death.

Early Historical Revisionism

To this crisis of liberalism, some nationalist intellectuals and politicians in Argentina reacted with historical revisionism. 1934 saw the publication of *Argentina y el imperialismo británico (1806-1933)* (Argentina and British Imperialism), in which the brothers Rodolfo and Julio Irazusta harshly condemned the recently signed pact. Both came from a family of medium rural producers and were interested in national politics from a young age. Although the family was close to the center-left party, UCR, a trip to France brought them closer to the antidemocratic nationalism of Charles Maurras and the French Action. In Argentina, they were members of the Republican League, a Catholic group close to fascism, and worked as writers and journalists. They both celebrated General Uriburu's coup d'état in 1930. In their 1934 book, they described the pact between Argentina and Great Britain as a triumph of the British imperialist interests in the Río de la Plata.

⁷Ibid., p. 164.

Behind the signing of this treaty, the authors saw the persistence of an antinational oligarchy that had directed Argentine political life since independence—except in the period of the Rosas government—and had turned the country into a territory of British dominance. In the revisionist imagination, the term „oligarchy“ had a precise, yet at the same time, vague, meaning; it did not define a political, economic, or social group, but rather a sector of the elite united by a militantly antinational ideology.⁸ That ideology was thought to have remained constant for over a hundred years, aloof from the transformations of society at large. This was a schematic argument, yet one that had lasting effects on the minds of Argentines.

The representatives of this first revisionism, conservative and nationalist, set themselves to the task of spreading a new interpretation of the Argentine past, rereading the national history, and searching for the keys to understanding their present-day crisis. In 1940, Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz published *Política británica en el Río de la Plata* (British politics in the Río de la Plata) and José María Rosa *Defensa y pérdida de nuestra independencia económica* (Defense and Loss of Our Economic Independence). Both books are representative of the concerns and perspectives of this early revisionism. They describe two irreconcilable models for the nation: one representative of national interests, the other representative of foreigners. It is no surprise that the „enlightened“ Bernardino Rivadavia, first president of the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata between 1826 and 1827, when the territory of Argentina was still undefined, became the target of the harshest revisionist attacks, and with him the entire Unitarian faction, blamed for importing alien ideologies to Argentine soil and for betraying national sovereignty by creating foreign debt. As Minister of Government and Foreign Relations of the province of Buenos Aires between 1820 and 1824, Rivadavia had requested a loan from the Baring Brothers bank,

⁸Tulio Halperín Donghi, *El revisionismo histórico argentino como visión decadentista de la historia nacional*, in: *Ensayos de historiografía*, Buenos Aires 1996, pp. 107-126, here, p. 114.

based in London, which began the long history of Argentina's foreign debt and was paid off only in 1904.

The specific and novel aspect of the imperialism denounced by revisionist authors is that it is imposed not from outside but from within, aided by the complicity of the national oligarchy.⁹ The Unitarian party was the quintessential expression of that „nation-sellers“ oligarchy. The Federals and Unitarians were the two opposing parties during the civil wars in Argentina after the Revolution of 1810; the Federals favoured the creation of a decentralized political order, while the Unitarians, in contrast, called for a governance system centred in Buenos Aires, following the structure created by the Spanish colonial administration in the late 18th century. In the liberal imaginary of the 19th century, the Unitarians represented the advancement of civilization and progress, which had to gradually spread from Buenos Aires to the inland provinces. In this narrative, the population of Buenos Aires had defended the city from the English invasions in 1806 and 1807 and then faced the tyranny of Rosas, always defending the cause of freedom. The Federals, on the other hand, saw in the Unitarians the representatives of the interests of Buenos Aires, reluctant to share with the provinces the large customs revenues it obtained from the port. Throughout the 19th century, the Federalists opposed the centralist projects of national organisation promoted by Buenos Aires.¹⁰ Federalism was deeply rooted among the populations of the inland and, according to its defenders, represented the true interests of the ordinary people.

While the role of the Unitarians was highlighted by liberal historiography, revisionism revalued the role of the Federals. However, the disagreement between the two historiographic currents was not total. The revisionists did not question, for example, the calendar of national dates installed by liberal historiography, deeply rooted in

⁹Diana Quattrocchi-Woison, *Los males de la memoria. Historia y política en la Argentina* (The ills of memory. History and politics in Argentina), Buenos Aires 1995, p. 108.

¹⁰Hilda Sabato, *El pensamiento de Bartolomé Mitre*, p. 14.

Argentine society through compulsory public school education.¹¹ For both revisionists and liberals, the birth of the nation was in 1810, with the beginning of the revolution against Spain, and its consolidation in 1816, when formal independence was declared. To those dates and events, the revisionists added others, such as the Battle of Vuelta de Obligado (1845), glorified as a triumph in the defence of the national sovereignty against the invading powers, France and Great Britain. They also modified the pantheon of heroes that liberal historiography had installed: popular leaders from the time of the Revolution, such as Martín Güemes, or Manuel Dorrego, shot by the Unitarian leader Juan Lavalle, formed a new pantheon of historical personalities. In the Federal group, which the Unitarians had traditionally defined as bloodthirsty barbarians, the revisionists saw the expression of a country model more suited to national interests.

If the demonization of the government of Rivadavia and the Unitarians comes as no surprise, neither does the redemption of Juan Manuel de Rosas, represented as tyrant and dictator in the liberal historiography. This image of Rosas dominates the famous *Historia de la República Argentina* (History of the Argentine Republic), written by Vicente Fidel López and published between 1883 and 1893, and *La política liberal bajo la tiranía de Rosas* (Liberal politics under the tyranny of Rosas) published by José Manuel de Estrada in 1873. Revisionist authors did not see Rosas as a tyrant, but as a defender of national sovereignty who had successfully resisted the naval blockades of France and Great Britain. In their view, Rosas had not given in to the will of any social group—neither the common people nor the elites—but rather guided public life by controlling both groups. Thus, in the revisionist mindset, the unpredictable and threatening aspects of mass democracy could be resolved by the existence of a strong, centralized government that rose above varied, not always convergent, social interests.

¹¹Luis Alberto Romero (ed.), *La Argentina en la escuela. La idea de nación en los textos escolares*, Buenos Aires 2004.

What these writers challenged was not merely the political democratization ushered in by the Sáenz Peña Law, but also the way in which Argentina had been incorporated into the world economy in the second half of the 19th century.¹² In that insertion, the privileged bond with Great Britain—Argentina's chief trading partner until the 1930s—struck them as particularly harmful. The above-mentioned Roca-Runciman Pact was, in the revisionist reading, the highest possible concession of national interests to the British and the last link in a chain of betrayals of their homeland that went back to the very origins of the Argentine Republic. Yet how was it possible that the true story should have remained unknown to the Argentine people for so long? It was liberal historiography—the revisionists believed—that had intentionally concealed that past, covering up alternative projects and plans for the nation that finally prevailed.

The revisionist thus saw in the contemporary *Historia de la Nación Argentina* (History of the Argentine Nation), published by Ricardo Levene in 1938, the major expression of that „official“ history.¹³ At the beginning of the 20th century, the *Nueva Escuela Histórica* (New Historical School) to which Levene belonged had begun the task of revising the prevailing image of Rosas. This „revision“ sought to offer a picture of the Rosist era richer in nuances, making exhaustive use of the available historical sources for this purpose. The New Historical School was the first historiographic current in Argentina that in its investigations incorporated the parameters of legitimacy and rigour considered scientific and academic at that time. The renewed interest in Rosas should not lead to a positive image of him but formulate well-founded criticism. In the case of the revisionists, however, the investigation of the Rosas government had the explicit goal of vindicating it.¹⁴

¹²Halperín Donghi, *El revisionismo*, p. 109.

¹³Alejandro Cattaruzza, *El revisionismo. Itinerarios de cuatro décadas*, in: idem / Alejandro Eujanian (eds.), *Políticas de la historia. Argentina 1860-1960*, Buenos Aires 2003, pp.143-184, here, p. 156.

¹⁴José Carlos Chiaramonte, *Usos políticos de la historia. Lenguaje de clases y revi-*

Although the revisionists did not share a single united ideological stance, they did have a few points in common that seem to have been their most lasting legacy. The first is their claim that the true history of the nation was hidden, suppressed by an official narrative. This genuine history, besides being more faithful to the facts, they believed, is the one that should serve as the model for the ever-derailed present. The second legacy of revisionism is the preference for the charismatic leader, the strongman, rather than for republican institutions. Distrustful of the popular masses—though also of the ineffectiveness of the political leaders—the revisionists turn to, as we have seen, the figure of Rosas as a model, the leader of gauchos and elites. This distrust for the democratic system reappeared in Argentine history, again and again, in the long alternations between democracies and authoritarian regimes that best describes the Argentinian 20th century.

It is no wonder that many revisionists transferred their admiration for Rosas to the triumphant Perón in the mid-1940s. However, the increasingly tight bond the leader of 17 October forged with the working class quickly revealed to the revisionists the unexpected turn that Peronism took. If there had remained any lingering doubt about Peronism for them, it soon vanished: the heroes of liberalism, Urquiza, Mitre, Sarmiento, and Roca, were chosen as the names of the recently nationalized train lines.

Toward a Leftist Revisionism

This long explanation is necessary to understand more recent developments in revisionism. The mutations of revisionism over the 20th century were related both to Argentina's tumultuous political development after 1955 and the shifting context of Latin America in the global context. The early revisionism, with its nationalistic, conservative roots, flourished between 1930 and 1955. The fall and eventual outlawing of Peronism, together with the Cuban Revolution and the growing

sionismo histórico (Political uses of history. Class language and historical revisionism), Buenos Aires 2013, p. 148.

weight of the self-declared „national Left“ in Argentina, opened up new positions within revisionism.

Peronism in its origins had been an attempt to avoid social revolution, with the state acting as an arbitrator among the social classes, without identifying with any of them. Nevertheless, the bond between Perón and the workers, increasingly close starting in 1944, together with the ban placed on the movement after 1955, allowed one to forget the movement's essentially conservative cast. During the 1960s, and particularly during the 1970s, Peronism began to be seen more and more as a banned mass movement and, for that very reason, as potentially revolutionary.¹⁵ The Cuban Revolution, in 1959, made that horizon one of the possible outlets for the ever more engulfing political and institutional crisis of Argentina. The word „revolution“ became part of the daily vocabulary, parroted superficially by sectors of the political leadership and—as Halperín reminds us—by young people who rarely understood that social revolution can be a serious matter.¹⁶

To the tolling sound of a popular revolution there arose a neorevisionism that lionized no longer just Juan Manuel de Rosas—viewed now as a powerful landholder who defended the order of cattle ranches in the province of Buenos Aires—but rather, the provincial *caudillos*, who were truly representatives of the common people: Chacho Peñaloza, Felipe Varela, and Facundo Quiroga. The *caudillos* were regional leaders who exercised political and military authority, mainly at the local level. Their power was based on the control of economic resources, mainly land and animals, and the possibility of recruiting men. In the period before the organisation of the nation-states in South America, the *caudillos* were the guarantors of order and the maintenance of social structures.¹⁷ At the political and military level, they defended local interests and provincial autonomy against Buenos Aires' attempts to impose a centralized political order. The revaluation that revisionism made of these popular figures during the politicized

¹⁵Halperín Donghi, *El revisionismo*, p. 121.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, *El revisionismo*, p. 122.

¹⁷John Lynch, *Caudillos in Spanish America 1800-1850*, Oxford 1992, p. 183.

1960s and 1970s found a highly receptive audience in Peronist and left-wing movements. There seemed to be an obvious parallel, which the revisionists did not hesitate to draw, between the repression of which the *caudillos* were victims in the final decades of the 19th century and the repression to which Peronism was subjected after the putsch against Perón in 1955. In both cases, what seemed to be repressed was the popular will. For the first time, the revisionist reading of the Argentine past was transformed into the official interpretation of a mass movement.¹⁸

This new ideological climate found its expression in the revisionist publications of those years. In 1963 Eduardo Astesano, published *Martín Fierro y la justicia social* (Martín Fierro and the social justice); in 1964 José María Rosa presented *Rivadavia y el imperialismo financiero* (Rivadavia and the financial imperialism); 1965 saw the release of *El asesinato de Dorrego. Poder, oligarquía y penetración extranjera en el Río de la Plata* (The murder of Dorrego. Power, oligarchy and foreign penetration in the Río de la Plata) by Rodolfo Ortega Peña and Eduardo Duhalde; in 1968, there appeared *Historia de la Nación Latinoamericana* (History of the Latin American Nation) by Jorge Abelardo Ramos; in 1973, Norberto Galasso published the essay *¿Qué es el socialismo nacional?* (What is nationalist socialism?). Many of these works, such as *¿Qué es el ser nacional?* (What is the national being?; 1963) or *La formación de la conciencia nacional* (The formation of the national awareness; 1960), by Hernández Arregui, were veritable commercial successes. All these publications reached a mass audience among the younger generations of the 1960s and 1970s. As with earlier revisionism, these authors were not academic historians, but lawyers, politicians, journalists, and writers interested in the Argentine past, and therefore did not conduct a rigorous analysis of the historical sources. Some of them were communists, others were militants in one of the many branches of Peronism. On the whole, these writers offered varied outlooks that did not necessarily coincide

¹⁸Cattaruzza, *El revisionismo histórico*, p. 171.

in announcing social revolution, but which did show revisionism's flexibility in expressing, through various historical circumstances, the public opinion of broad sectors of society.

The Unfinished Nation

Liberal historiography had the privilege of dominating school and university programs and enjoyed the institutional support that revisionism always lacked. The heroes and national dates of the liberal historiography were memorized by the children during their transit through public schools, and the image of Buenos Aires as a bastion of progress and civilization also prevailed among urban populations. Furthermore, during the 20th and 21st centuries, academic historians have mostly been linked to the liberal tradition. They have held chairs at the most prestigious universities in Argentina and have reached great prestige in historiographic production. Between revisionist writers and academic historians, there have been no serious debates, only mutual criticism. The revisionists, for example, have accused Tulio Halperín Donghi and Luis Alberto Romero of collaborating with the „official“ history at the service of imperialism.¹⁹

If revisionism had scant importance in the field of professional historiography, it lastingly fixated the representation of a „true“ history hidden behind the veil of the „official“ history in the public opinion, which became—as Halperín puts it—a part of the „historical common sense“ of Argentines.²⁰ This explains the high sales figures currently achieved by today's revisionists, such as Felipe Pigna, Pacho O'Donnell, or Norberto Galasso, authors who identify themselves with a „national, popular and federalist“ revisionism.²¹ Some of them, such as O'Donnell and Pigna, have conducted successful radio and television programs on public and private stations and channels, from which

¹⁹Pacho O'Donnell, *Historiografía nacional, popular y federalista versus la apropiación imperial de la subjetividad*, in: idem (ed.), *La otra historia. El revisionismo nacional, popular y federalista*, Buenos Aires 2012, pp. 17-26, here, p. 17.

²⁰Quattrocchi-Woisson, *Los males de la memoria*, p. 16.

²¹O'Donnell, *Historiografía nacional*, p. 18.

they spread their revisionist views of the past. Some of O'Donnell's books, such as *La otra historia* (The other history; 2012), have reached high sales numbers. Pigna, on the other hand, is one of the most well-known historians in Argentina, although he did not study history at a university, but at a teacher training institute. His books, including *Los mitos de la historia argentina* (The myths of Argentine history; 2004), have been a commercial success. In this way, through the mass media, revisionist authors have achieved much wider diffusion than academic historians.

Yet this commercial success results not only from the schematic explanations of these authors, more concerned with revealing the „true“ story than with understanding the interaction between the various social players in each historical setting. Rather, their currency and validity seem to be related to their ability to fill a collective social demand for historical explanations that academic historiographic production has ignored. Revisionist interpretations, even though they simplify historical processes and offer accounts that lack nuance, manage to explain Argentine history in terms that are easy to understand for a non-specialized audience, establishing linear relationships of causality between past and present. Most academic historians, in contrast, can hardly be read outside of universities, due to increasing disciplinary specialization and the academic writing style. Few historians in Argentina have managed to achieve scientific rigor in non-academic works. The success of revisionist authors can also be explained by the fact that their interpretation of the past is shared by a significant number of Argentines, frustrated by the evidence that their country has been, for many decades, sinking into an irreversible decline. For many people, the country's decadence reached its deepest point in the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) and again in the economic crisis of 2001, resulting from—in the view of many—the persistence of minority antinational groups representing their own interests as if they were those of society as a whole. Other groups, more concentrated in urban centres such as Buenos Aires, attribute the causes of the per-

petual crisis to the social and political transformations promoted by General Perón and the Peronist Party.

In this way, Argentine society is divided into blocs. Some dream of an export-oriented Argentina, open to the world, the country imagined by liberalism after 1852 that became a fleeting reality in the late 19th century. This liberal ideal had scant tools for guiding the ever more hazardous course that Argentina followed in the choppy waters of the 20th century. Baffling was Yrigoyen's triumph and the irruption of the masses in national politics, baffling was the abrupt crisis of the agroexport model, baffling was the emergence of social conflicts in the 1880s that seemed destined to be resolved by the natural action of economic forces as well as the rise of Personism. The nation of the first revisionism, on the other hand, was defined by the defence of sovereignty, the protagonism of the national and the local in the face of the foreign, and an authoritarian political order. The second revisionism placed the body of the nation in the „people“—identified with the Peronist and socialist populace. In both revisionisms, national interests seem to confront those of a small but powerful antinational oligarchy.

The election of Néstor Kirchner in 2003, and that of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in 2007, opened a period favourable to the revisionist perspective. In those years, the state promoted a revaluation of the role played during the 1970s by the left-wing Peronists. During the term of Fernández de Kirchner, the confrontation between social sectors was exacerbated and the official rhetoric quickly divided them into two groups: one national and popular, representing the ordinary people; the other representing the elitist oligarchy, Buenos Aires and rural producers. This conflict reached a climax during the „resolution 125“ vote in 2008, which sought to increase retention taxes on rural exports. In 2011, Fernández de Kirchner created the Manuel Dorrego National Institute of Argentine and Iberoamerican Historical Revisionism by decree. The institute was to investigate figures from the Argentine past who, according to the decree, had not received adequate atten-

tion in academic institutions. Its first director was Pacho O'Donnell, and the awards handed out annually by the institute were named after two central figures of revisionism: José María Rosa and Jorge Abelardo Ramos. Historians from the academic field, such as Mirta Zaida Lobato, Hilda Sabato, and Juan Suriano criticized the fact that the institute was led by historians without academic backgrounds.²² A few years later, in 2015, President Mauricio Macri decided to close the centre.

The question of the interpretation of the past is still a current and burning issue in Argentina, as is the discussion about which social sectors are the true representatives of the nation. Twenty years into the 21st century, the nation in Argentina is an unfinished project. In an interminable back-and-forth debate, the true representatives of the nation face down its enemies. This eternal dispute, perhaps, explains the continued currency of revisionism in contemporary Argentina. It was this historiographic current that definitively implanted scepticism toward the liberal project that was worked out by a few enlightened minds in the second half of the 19th century.

²²Polémico instituto de revisión de la historia, in: La Nación, 28.11.2011, <<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/impulsa-el-gobierno-una-revision-de-la-historia-nid1427023/>> (31.08.2021).