Jaksi#, Iván. "Sarmiento: Liberalism between Civilization and Barbarism." *Liberal Moments: Reading Liberal Texts*. By Ewa Atanassow and Alan S. Kahan. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016. 91–97. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474251082.0018>>.

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Sarmiento: Liberalism between Civilization and Barbarism

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The Argentine Republic at that time [1825] presented a lively and interesting picture. All interests, all ideas, all passions met together to agitate and argue for their cause. Here, a caudillo who wanted nothing to do with the rest of the Republic; there, a people that asked only to emerge from isolation farther away, a government that brought Europe to America; elsewhere, another one that hated even the name of civilization; in some places, the Inquisition was reinstated; in others, freedom of religion was declared the first right of man; some shouted 'federation', and others 'central government'; each of these diverse positions had strong interests and passions, invincible in their support. I need to clear this chaos a bit, to show the role that [Juan Facundo] Quiroga was called upon to play and the great work he should have achieved. To portray the campaign commander who takes power over the city and finally annihilates it, I have had to describe the Argentine land, the customs it engenders, the characters it develops. ... Life in the Argentine countryside ... is not just any accident. It is the order of things, a system of association that is characteristic, normal, in my view unique in the world, and it alone suffices to explain our revolution. In the Argentine Republic before 1810, there were two distinct, rival, and incompatible societies, two diverse civilizations: one Spanish, European, cultured, and the other barbarous, American, almost indigenous. The revolution in the cities would serve only as a cause, as a driving force, whereby these two distinct ways of being in one people would be brought together, would collide, and after long years of struggle, one would absorb the other. I have indicated the normal association of the countryside, the lack of association a thousand times worse than that of a nomad tribe. ... This phenomenon of social organization existed in 1810, and it still exists, modified on many points, modifying slowly on others, and on many still intact.²

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811–88) published these words in 1845 while in exile in Chile from the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas. It was in the freer environment of Chile that Sarmiento wrote the masterpiece that made him famous and became a classic in Spanish-American letters, *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845). Sarmiento's political target was not Juan Facundo Quiroga, a regional warlord who was assassinated in 1835, but Rosas, the current dictator of the Argentine Confederation who governed the country with an iron hand and without a constitution from 1829 to 1852. Coming from a provincial background in Western Argentina, Sarmiento was only vaguely aware of the liberal reforms that had taken place in the Atlantic port of Buenos Aires that eventually led to Rosas's takeover in 1829. Sarmiento's views developed not so much from this early liberalism, which he considered abstract to the point of naivety, as from his experience under dictatorship in the 1830s and exile in Chile in the 1840s. It was in the latter nation that he developed a long-term vision for the future of his country.

As the passage quoted above suggests, Sarmiento identified both circumstantial and structural factors in his analysis of the recent history of the Río de la Plata region: among the former, he emphasized the ideological struggles that characterized post-independence Argentina (as in much of Latin America) concerning the establishment of republics after three centuries of centralized monarchical rule. As he recognized in the passage quoted earlier, revolutionary ideas had developed in cities like Buenos Aires, in close contact with European ideas, while the hinterland followed its own pragmatic dynamics in response to regional sources of power. The latter constituted the deeper, more structural elements that gave rise to the dictatorship. In Sarmiento's view, the countryside had prevailed over the civilized cities, led by figures like Facundo Quiroga and Rosas, due to social, cultural and economic conditions that were more influential than imported revolutionary ideas. Among the most important was the lack of a spirit of association, 'a thousand times worse than that of a nomad tribe', characteristic of the Argentine plains that prevented the development of civil society. Sarmiento's views in this respect came directly from Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* he read for the first time in the 1840s in Chile, and whom he invoked as a model in the introduction of his *Facundo*. Not only did he follow the book's format (beginning with a detailed review of geographic conditions), but some central ideas as well, to the extent that liberty and progress depended on the strength of voluntary private associations. He did not follow Tocqueville entirely, as evidenced by his enthusiasm for centralized political rule and his contempt for indigenous peoples, areas in which the French

thinker was, respectively, more sceptical and more sympathetic. Sarmiento's fundamental agenda, as reflected in the passage, became the transformation of the countryside in order to introduce a vibrant civil society based on immigration, the widespread distribution of land for agricultural purposes and free public education.

As stated above, Sarmiento's main target was the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas. Free from any strong ideological convictions, Rosas governed on behalf of a class of powerful landowners who had opposed the centralizing efforts of the early generation of liberals, the so-called Unitarios, whose centralist constitution of 1826 had offended provincial sensitivities by making governors appointees of the national government. Promulgated in a context of war against Brazil, the constitution alienated provincial interests in other ways as well, due to the demands of the war effort. Rosas's alternative to the form of constitutional government advocated by Río de la Plata liberals in the 1820s was a loose federal structure based on informal alliances that placed the province and port of Buenos Aires directly under his control. Ironically, Rosas did more to unite the country than his liberal predecessors ever accomplished, although at the cost of heavy and often cruel persecution of dissidents. He had established the principle of supreme authority that liberals reluctantly but increasingly recognized as the cornerstone of any viable government. As Sarmiento put it in *Facundo*, thanks to Rosas, 'the Unitarists's idea has been carried out; only the tyrant is unneeded. The day that a good government is established, it will find local resistance conquered and everything in place for the union.'³ From the safety of Chile (home to many other Argentine exiles), Sarmiento agitated against Rosas, denouncing his abuses of authority while, at the same time, proposing a scenario for liberal development after a putative victory against the dictator.

The vehicle for Sarmiento's twofold strategy was *Facundo*, a book that was part essay, part political pamphlet, part history and part fiction, drawing from the popular technique of *folletines*, or stories delivered in instalments in the thriving Santiago press of the period. Finding inspiration in the writings of Edward Gibbon and the historians of the French romantic school, Sarmiento's main focus was the barbarism that he saw as deeply rooted in the land. Such barbarism was not simply a consequence of the instinctive cruelty that drove Sarmiento's Juan Facundo Quiroga, but rather the product of a land so uninhabited as to lack the fundamental conditions for minimal human association. In that terrain, the absence of settled agriculture, commerce and ultimately civilization, the heartland of Argentina could only produce the gauchos (cowboys of the plains) who lived off cattle and led a fiercely independent life in defiance of any

semblance of political order. These plainmen, according to Sarmiento, would always flock to charismatic leaders like Facundo, perpetuating the lack of any form of civil society. Beyond Facundo, he had in mind other warlords such as José Félix Aldao (1775–1845) and a multiplicity of other minor figures. And yet, his main purpose was to describe the obstacles for the emergence of a national state, and the near impossibility of bringing one about without a deliberate effort to eliminate both the gauchos, along with their leaders, and the conditions that made them possible.⁴

What is most significant about Sarmiento's *Facundo*, as a powerful political tract, is the argumentative dynamics that he skilfully established: if the land produced Juan Facundo Quiroga, and he had been vanquished by someone even more clever and ruthless, then the real and final obstacle for national development was the man who allegedly had him assassinated: Rosas. Sarmiento deployed all his powers as a writer to point an accusing finger against the dictator, whom he made responsible for the ills of Argentina and whose removal was nothing short of an epic struggle between civilization and barbarism.

Sarmiento underscored the authoritarianism of Rosas, but his platform for a successful movement against the regime was a more realistic and determined liberal approach to nation-building than that attempted by the Unitarios of the 1820s. He called upon the younger generation to embrace the ideas of political, economic and cultural development emerging from Europe in general, though especially from France since the Revolution of 1830. On practical grounds, he proposed a policy of European immigration to populate the land that would also be echoed by other members of his generation, like Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810–84), with whom he nevertheless had strong disagreements on matters of national organization. The point was to not only stimulate rural production in the vast expanses of the Argentine territory, but also to introduce the working values that had been squandered by the lifestyle of the gauchos. He concurrently advocated the free navigation of the rivers, especially those tributaries to the La Plata River, to provide more opportunities for agricultural production. Sarmiento added a number of standard policies for national development, including a standing army, a network of transportation and communication, a public education system, civil liberties and freedom of the press. It was a powerful package, one that did not fall on deaf ears, but it would take two decades before Sarmiento could implement some of these cherished policies, when he became president of the nation from 1868 to 1874.

Of all the policies he promoted in *Facundo*, education was perhaps the most central aspect of his overall programme for national development. In Chile,

he designed textbooks to facilitate literacy and, with Andrés Bello, advanced an orthographical reform of the Spanish language for the same purpose. In Chile, he observed and contributed to the foundation of the public educational system, which he saw as fundamental for republican citizenship. Visiting the United States in 1847, he was inspired by his discussions with Horace Mann, the founder of the public educational system in the state of Massachusetts, one of the largest in the union. Later, he published a book based on Mann's life and writings, maintained contact with his widow, Mary Peabody Mann (who in 1868 published the first English translation of Sarmiento's *Facundo*) and, as president, invited sixty-five schoolteachers from New England to teach elementary school in the provinces of Argentina.

Sarmiento's emphasis on education as a pillar of the construction of citizenship deserves particular attention because it is more firmly attached to republican than to liberal theory. The republic, in Sarmiento's conception, was not only based on virtue but also involved the central duty of inculcating virtue in its members through education. While he praised and promoted the freedom of citizens to pursue their own interests, Sarmiento placed a higher value on a concept of republic that required civic duties, electoral participation and defence of the homeland, including armed defence, by its citizens. Sarmiento made no distinction in this regard between the native-born and the immigrant, and expected the same allegiance to the republic from both. Immigrants were particularly important, for they could drive the creation of new towns and villages in the countryside. The government would play the role of facilitator for the creation of municipalities, the implementation of free education and the promotion of agriculture in small landholdings. But the entire project rested on a republic of virtuous citizens, educated for that purpose.

Such emphasis on education for republican citizenship may seem at odds with other aspects of Sarmiento's agenda. As president of Argentina, he showed a marked tendency to build the state from above, providing it with the means to crush provincial autonomy should it interfere with the aims of the central government. This emphasis must be seen in the context of a larger liberal concern in nineteenth-century Latin America. What was required in the post-independence context, liberals of the second generation believed, was not so much limiting the power of the state as building it in the first place. Much of the chaos that followed independence had been blamed precisely on the weakness, if not absence, of the state, thus allowing the persistence of corporate groups and enclaves of regional power dominated by figures like Facundo. After the defeat of Rosas, Sarmiento and many liberals of his generation took a decided

turn towards strengthening the powers of the central government to confront tumultuous regions and any other challenges from competing interest groups.

After his return to Chile in the late 1840s, Sarmiento developed a clear admiration for the political system of the United States. Sarmiento thus tended to support the autonomy of the provinces under a federal framework, as opposed to the more centralist tendencies of the 1853 Constitution. This was the charter promulgated by the government of Justo José Urquiza after the defeat of Juan Manuel de Rosas, under the inspiration of Juan Bautista Alberdi, which still failed to unite the entire country (this did not happen until Buenos Aires agreed to join the union in 1859, an arrangement sanctioned by the constitutional reform of 1860). At this stage, Sarmiento took a favourable view of the United States. In contrast to the small republics of antiquity, the Renaissance or even Chile, the United States was a large country that in many ways resembled Argentina: vast amounts of available land, a shortage of labour that led to increasing immigration and an enormous potential as a vibrant democratic society where both markets and the institutions of civil society kept gaining strength.

The experience of exile and travel through foreign lands, moreover, helped cement Sarmiento's views with regard to strong government. The Chilean Constitution of 1833, which he saw at work, eliminated the provincial assemblies and replaced the elected governors of the previous 1828 charter with appointed ones. The executive also had the power to suspend the constitution in cases of internal turmoil. Both he and Alberdi agreed that this was one of the fundamental factors that explained Chilean stability for most of the nineteenth century. Sarmiento also had a chance to observe the effect of Abraham Lincoln's decree suppressing habeas corpus in the secessionist states while he was Argentine ambassador to the United States (1865–8). These two concrete examples informed his own policies as president when dealing with internal unrest. There, he found the political and juridical basis for imposing order in the republic.

As Natalio R. Botana has shown, three tendencies coexisted in Sarmiento's notion of republic: 'A forward-looking liberal tradition; a strong republic capable of concentrating power in the State (and combating the still-existing characters portrayed in *Facundo*); and the old idea of a republic inspired by the civic virtue of the citizen dedicated to the public good.'⁵ Much of this multilayered approach to nation-building can be explained as a result of the transition from republicanism to liberalism, which took place in Latin America from the early period of independence in the 1810s and 1820s, through the consolidation of liberal institutions (although neither in every place nor at the same time)

from the 1850s through the 1880s.⁶ Republicanism had been adopted in Latin America as an ideological weapon against the principles of monarchical rule, and as a way to rally the citizenry behind the notions of popular sovereignty, constitutionalism and the division of powers. What is consistent about Sarmiento, who embraced the second, post-1820s version of liberalism, is his lingering commitment to virtue as the fundamental basis for republicanism. In this respect, he was not unique, as even Rosas promoted republican virtue, a facet of his rule that Sarmiento chose to ignore.⁷

Lastly, the question remains as to the particular moment, or insight, that led Sarmiento to develop his political ideas, granting that such ideas usually take time to mature and develop, as they clearly did in his case. Going back to the quote that opens this chapter, one cannot escape Sarmiento's reference to 'the interests' and 'the passions'. In his view, they were both represented in the Argentina of the 1820s. Both had equal status and neither could be subordinated to the other for the larger sake of the public good in either a Hamiltonian or Madisonian sense. They clashed, as tectonic plates, wreaking havoc on the country. Such a situation was inherent in the land, the product of the clash between Europe and America, or civilization versus barbarism, making it nearly impossible to form a viable political society. Writing in 1845, Sarmiento argued that the struggle continued in order to mobilize opinion against the regime of Rosas. Defeating the dictator but using his accomplishments (especially in terms of uniting the region) provided the basis for a new liberal era of national institutions, international commerce and republican virtue. It was an era unlike the exuberant 1820s, perhaps more realistic and effective, but remarkably indebted to the dictatorship it left behind.

Sarmiento's eclectic combination of nation-building elements such as a strong state, education for citizenship and a more pragmatic approach to the necessary equilibrium between national, state and local institutions stands as the most significant rethinking of republican ideas, from a liberal standpoint, in nineteenth-century Spanish-American political history. His views developed, not as an exercise in theory, but as a product of reflecting on unsuccessful earlier nation-building experiences, a concrete engagement with the implementation of national institutions and a drive to adapt liberal philosophy to local conditions.