



7-2020

"You Cannot Slaughter Ideas": Liberalism and the State of Exception in Argentina

Arlo Elliott
California Polytechnic University San Luis Obispo

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.29.03>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [Latin American History Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

Elliott, Arlo (2020) "'You Cannot Slaughter Ideas": Liberalism and the State of Exception in Argentina," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 29 , Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.29.03>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol29/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com

“You Cannot Slaughter Ideas”: Liberalism and the State of Exception in Argentina

Arlo Elliot, *California Polytechnic University San Luis Obispo*

*Existing historiography of Latin America has highlighted the role of liberalism in the 19th century formation of modern states, but it is typically viewed as historically discontinuous with the subsequent violence of the 20th century. Narrowing the focus to Argentina, we see historians like Jeremy Adelman asserting that the promise and successes of the early liberal republics were historically isolated from the brutal military rule that would emerge following the Peronist era. More intellectual histories of Argentina like David Rock’s *Authoritarian Argentina* also focus on the prominence of conservative nationalists in this period of violence. Incorporating the work of the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, I argue that embedded within the legal and practical framework of Argentine liberalism is the possibility of a “state of exception”, wherein the sovereign body suspends the law in the name of saving it.*

*The purpose of applying the theoretical lens of Agamben’s work to Argentina’s politics are twofold. The first is to overcome the idea that the development of liberalism in Argentina and the extra-judicial violence that succeeded it are historically discreet phenomena. The two share a connective tissue, as described in the work of Agamben, and the same laws that brought the liberal “public sphere” into being also simultaneously demarcated an illegible outside, producing beings outside the law. The second is the issue of how we as historians bear witness to an event like the disappearances and murders of political dissidents, as detailed in the government report *Nunca Mas*. Looking at that extra-judicial violence as an aberration outside of the arch of “historical progress” not only denies those affected a voice, but also crucially cedes a portion of the political realm of memory to the same ideas that helped formulate the “state of exception”. Keywords: Agamben, state of exception, Argentina, liberalism, homo sacer, Habermas, public sphere.*

Introduction

At the end of his book *Republic of Capital*, Jeremy Adelman writes a eulogy to what he calls the “unfinished revolution” of liberalism in Argentina, highlighting among other things, “the failure of political parties to act as the conduits for political integration” and thus head off the swelling of dissent and subsequent legitimization crises that would define the 20th century. (Adelman, 1999, 291). The question that bears asking is whether or not liberalism in both Argentine and general context ever offered truly popular political integration. In Argentina, the

founder of the liberal tradition is widely considered to be author, activist and eventual president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. In his epoch-defining work *Facundo*, first published in 1845, Sarmiento informs us that there are two forces in Argentina: one of civilization and progress, and one of fatalism and barbarism, diametrically opposed and incompatible. A close reading of this text reveals that Sarmiento believed that it was an obscure and barbaric nature of the *gauchos*, or Argentine cowboys that commanded much of the rural economy, that stood in the way of liberal republican government in Argentina.

The Republic of Argentina underwent a number of radical shifts following the framing of its first constitution in 1853, eventually culminating in a legitimacy crisis that overthrew Isabel Perón, then president, and replaced her with a military junta. In understanding the erasure of political and historical subjects, it is important understand the historical conditions necessary to strip a human being of their rights. When it came to power, the junta declared a state of siege and over the course of seven years of authoritarian rule snuffed out the lives of as many as thirty thousand *desparecidos*, or “the disappeared.” Seeking to respectfully bear witness to the *desparecidos*, this paper will seek to interrogate the grounds of history and memory in Argentina to see how the state of exception becomes not only possible but institutionalized. The paper seeks to link these two disparate events in Argentina’s history by the use of critical theory, engaging with the ideas of Jurgen Habermas and Giorgio Agamben to illustrate how the conditions within liberalism allowed for the suspension of the rights of subjects, the invocation of a state of exception, and ultimately the justification for mass murder. While the era of early liberalism and the period of military rule in Argentina are separated by over one hundred years and a radically different international and domestic circumstance, this paper seeks to use the former to cast light on the latter and build on existing critiques by scholars like Agamben of how a liberal rights based framework can break down with a dramatic impact on society. Existing political, cultural, and racial tension can become inflamed and lead to both state and civilian violence. This is what happened in Argentina, yet rather than considering it as an aberration from the development of republicanism or liberalism in Argentina, this paper seeks to put it on a continuum with those political and social developments. Sarmiento viewed civilization and barbarism as irreconcilable forces in the Argentine social order, and the latter would have to be excluded or destroyed to make a liberal government function. By examining Sarmiento’s writing, this paper seeks to bring into question whether liberalism in its Argentine context ever lived up to lofty ideals of equality and universal rights for sovereign citizens, and whether or not its incompleteness or limitations allowed or prepared ground for the military junta that would eventually come to control the country through martial law.

The essay will be divided into three parts. The first will be a brief exposition of a theoretical framework for the state of exception furnished by Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben. The second, in two parts, will be an analysis of Argentine liberalism during the 19th century, beginning with a reading of *Facundo* interrogating the tension between civilization and barbarism and Sarmiento’s demarcation of what makes a legible subject. This will be used to inform an exposition of the subsequent development of institutional liberalism in Argentina, with the guiding historical reference being Hilda Sabato’s work *Political Participation in Buenos Aires*. The third and final section of the essay, also in two parts, will analyze the continued influence of

liberalism in Argentine amidst an increasingly volatile political climate, eventually resulting in the 1976 coup. This will conclude with a reading of *Nunca Mas* and other testimonies of the *despercidos*, seeking to bear witness to subjects that have been stripped of their rights and made illegible.

Theorizing the State of Exception and Bare Life

How does a body become excluded from the social order? Giorgio Agamben stresses that *homo sacer*, or bare life, plays an essential role in modern politics, “in which a human life is included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)”. (Agamben, 1998, 8). Agamben, drawing from the work of Carl Schmitt, reminds us of the paradoxical role of the sovereign in modern jurisprudence, where the sovereign is at the same time “outside and inside the juridical order”, “having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law” (Ibid, 15). The sovereign, operating from this position of paradox of being both the administrator and suspender of laws, is able to decree when laws no longer apply and thus designate beings “exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (Ibid, 28). Bare life is characterized by this ambiguous relation to the law, abandoned by the juridical order to the power of the sovereign. The extinguishing of this life is neither homicide (profane) nor sacrifice (religious); rather, the designation of bare life is what constitutes the authority of the sovereign (Ibid, 83). Using analysis indebted to Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics, Agamben points to the concentration camps in Nazi Germany as a physical reification of the state of exception, a space “in which not only is law completely suspended but fact and law are completely confused”(Ibid, 170). The construction and maintenance of the camps in Nazi Germany was furnished by the scientifico-juridical discourse of eugenics, which provided the justifications for designating beings as outside of the law, reduced to bare life (Ibid, 146). The social implications for the manufacture of bare life are obvious and devastating both for Agamben's example of Nazi Germany as well as the abstract juridical model he provides. Any legislative apparatus that can waive or void the rights of subjects by emergency decree necessarily grants those rights precariously; at this point, any pluralistic protections for minority groups or political dissidents granted by a liberal government can easily be stripped because of a real or imagined threat to sovereign authority.

This is a sketch of the theoretical framework that will be referenced in this study. Recognizing that Argentina has a different historical reality and intellectual tradition than Germany, the framework will be used minimally and when applicable. The first use will be in recovering a sketch of figures outside the law in the thought of Sarmiento (and the thinkers and policies he influenced) and in articulating what constituted bare life in late 19th century Argentina. The second will be in retracing the figure of bare life in the state of exception instituted by the military junta, this time manifested both in the physical space of the detention centers and in the practice of torture and execution. It is from the particulars of Argentine history that we may better understand and give nuance to the critical theory and history of the state of exception; likewise, the theory grants us a lens of viewing the social history of Argentina in a new light.

Argentine Liberalism and the Demarcation of Legible Subjects
 Facundo: Civilization or Barbarism

Since publication in 1845, the specter of *Facundo's* influence in Latin American political theory and the proposed dialectic of civilization and barbarism has loomed over Latin American literature and political critique (Sarmiento, 2003, 2). Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria notes in his introduction that Sarmiento attempted to give "Argentina a national discourse, a set of figures and ideas through which the country could think of itself" (Ibid, 10). To understand that discourse, this paper will perform a close reading of those figures and their influence to locate the threshold of bare life in Sarmiento's prose. In tracing the life of Juan Manuel Quiroga and his myriad grievances with the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas, Sarmiento also articulates the values and aspirations of a particular vein of Argentine liberalism that would become influential in the nascent republic. Thus, this analysis should not be thought of as arguing that *Facundo* became the guiding doctrine for all policies of the government, but rather represented an influential strain of thought that created a vision for Argentine public life. The central figure that Sarmiento writes against is that of the *caudillo*, or strong man, and the *gauchos*, or cowboys that support them. In Sarmiento's framework the prominence of the *caudillos* is a problem relating to the social life of *gauchos*, which he contrasts unfavorably with European enlightenment principles such as reason or the scientific method.

Sarmiento casts the knowledge of the *gaucho* (and of the *caudillo*) as originating from a profane and obscure source. His central premise, as in the title, is that the Argentine consciousness is going to be formed through a "struggle between European civilization and indigenous barbarism, between intelligence and matter." (Ibid, 59). He is deeply concerned with both the geography of the Pampas (the arid mountains of Argentina) and its resistance to more European modes of civilization, remarking that their topography has "reproduced in the pastoral habits of America the same grave countenances, hospitality, and dress of the Arabs." (Ibid, 60). The knowledge that exists in the Pampas comes about by way of poetry; awakened by the terrible expanse of the desert, with Sarmiento writing that "the man who moves among these scenes feels assaulted by fears and fantastic uncertainties, by dreams that disturb him while he is awake." (Ibid, 61). Yet Sarmiento draws a crucial distinction, between "learned poetry, the poetry of the city" and the "popular poetry, innocent and disorderly, of the *gaucho*" (Ibid, 62). This is the opaque source that the *gaucho* derives his authority from; notably, poetry could be set against a more modern form of knowledge production, such as history or science, emphasizing the crudity of the *gaucho's* epistemological framework.

In perhaps the liveliest section of the whole book, Sarmiento creates several sardonic portraits of the types of *gauchos* one might encounter in 19th century Argentina. The *rastreador*, who "is a serious, circumspect person, whose pronouncements are accepted as evidence in lower courts." (Ibid, 64). He can track thieves even if their tracks are two years old, and does so silently, with dignity as if though "microscopic power develops in the visual organs of these men" (Ibid, 66). Next is the *baqueno*, "the most complete topographer, the only map a general takes along to direct the movements of his campaign" (Ibid, 66). Like the *rastreador*, he works in silent pronouncements, as if "a traveler asks to be taken directly to a place fifty leagues distant, the *baqueno* stops for a moment, searches the horizon, examines the ground... and takes off at a gallop

as straight as an arrow, until he changes direction for reasons only he knows." (Ibid, 67). He can tell the direction an enemy is approaching by the movement of wildlife; we learn that "If condors and the crows fly in a circle in the sky, he knows whether there are men hiding, or a recently abandoned camp, or simply a dead animal." (Ibid, 67). The authority that these men are granted in the society of the Pampas derives from a source that is illegible for Sarmiento; for him, these are absurd rituals codifying unearned positions of power.

Continuing with his satire, Sarmiento tells the reader that the *bad gaucho* is a horse thief by occupation, feared for his prowess on the horse and with weapons, and respected even those he robs from (Ibid, 68). With each theft "The poets of the surrounding region add this new deed to the biography of the hero of the desert, and his renown soars all across the vast countryside." (Ibid, 68). The *cantor* meanwhile is a figure ripped from the Middle Ages; a bard or troubadour who contributes to "the ideal image of that life of revolt, civilization, barbarism, and danger." (Ibid, 69). The *cantor* "is doing the same work of chronicle, customs, history, biography as the bard of the Middle ages, and his verses would be collected later as the documents and data on which future historians would base their evidence", except that Argentina does not yet have a society "with a knowledge of events superior to that which this poor fellow unfolds in his innocent rhapsodies" (Ibid, 70). The methods by which the *gauchos* constitute their histories and knowledge is, for Sarmiento, archaic and arcane; a byproduct of feudal living conditions and a lack of modern education.

Sarmiento effusively presents the reader with these portraits of *gaucho* culture as, presumably, comic relief for an otherwise serious book. Yet we can catch a glimpse of his beliefs in it nonetheless: the knowledge of the *gaucho* arrives through obscure means; it is not legitimated through European institutions, through the press or the nascent public sphere. There gatherings take place in the *pulperia*, an "assembly without public objective, without any social purpose" (Ibid, 74). It is an impenetrable discourse that, for Sarmiento, signifies barbarism and contempt for reason. The people of the Pampas have no interest in government but wield mighty influence over it nonetheless, as Sarmiento writes that the people did not demand representation at Buenos Aires through violence but "with the barbarism they sent to it in Facundo and Rosas." (Ibid, 127). Acclimated in a nomadic lifestyle and profane knowledge and cast from the mold of the Pampas, Argentina has birthed "two distinct, rival, and incompatible societies... One Spanish, European, Cultured, and the other barbarous, American, almost indigenous." (Ibid, 77). The *pulperia* is neither a *salon* nor a coffee house, and the sense of public obligation for the *gaucho* starts and ends with his obligations to his *caudillo*.

The bifurcation between civilization and barbarism emerges for Sarmiento as one group dedicated to abstract ideals and the progress of humanity and the other hopelessly and illegibly resistant to enlightenment. It is for Sarmiento not just a matter of culture but race, as he tells us that "The American races live in idleness, and demonstrate an incapacity, even when forced, to apply themselves to hard, uninterrupted work." (Ibid, 51). Sarmiento notes Africans "provided [Rosas] with excellent, incorruptible soldiers of another language and a savage race." (Ibid, 223). When discussing the influence of Facundo himself, Sarmiento notes that his sayings "have a stamp of originality that gave him a certain Oriental aspect, a certain tint of Solomonic wisdom in the mind of the common class." (Ibid, 101). This is no compliment, but rather another

suggestion that any wisdom held by the fabled *caudillo* is foreign to civilization. Sarmiento has no doubts as to where this civilization lies, and proposes that the best solution to the barbarism of the countryside is to encourage a massive European migration (Ibid, 249). This can be seen in part as a reaction to the Rosas regime, where following the French blockade of Buenos Aires “Death to the foreigners!” became a common slogan (Ibid, 249). Yet it can also be read as a further demarcation of civilization and barbarism, this time along racial lines. Over a hundred years later in 1978, the Argentine Minister of the Interior, General Albano Harguindeguy, announced that it would become necessary for Argentina to encourage European immigration “to remain one of the three countries with the highest proportions of white population in the world” (Jaroslavsky, 2004, 100).

What is revealed in Sarmiento’s writing is the figure of bare life, beings placed on the outside of legible society in order to constitute a normative inside. Sarmiento and Harguindeguy, the junta general, are both addressing a vastly different public in vastly different eras of Argentine history, yet both trace the figure of a legible inside and an excluded outside based on whiteness and alleged European virtues. Sarmiento at this point is merely a writer and not a legislator, yet his ideas are crucial to giving shape and form to the liberal dialogue and policies that would be developed after the fall of the Rosas regime. In the next section we will ask, more generally, how does the figure of bare life come to be constituted in the nascent Argentine public sphere?

Institutionalization of Liberalism: The Public Sphere in Buenos Aires

A fellow member of “the outlaw generation” of Argentinian writers that Sarmiento belonged to, Esteban Echeverría’s 1838 short story “The Slaughterhouse” can be thought of as a counterpart to *Facundo*, highlighting the “barbarity” of the city of Buenos Aires instead of the countryside (Echeverría, 1980, 3). Depicting Buenos Aires during a period of flood and famine, the people of the city go wild when a small shipment of fifty cattle arrive, and even the rats “were revitalized when they heard such wild cries and began to run in every direction” (Ibid, 7). The cows arriving were seen religiously, as a gift from The Restorer of Laws (Rosas), and the first slaughtered was for him; even the butcher shop was governed by a *caudillo* (Ibid, 8). But as impatience for the fresh meat spread through the crowd, “one could see four hundred black women crouching in a line unraveling in their laps the tangle of intestines and pulling off, one by one, the little pieces of fat that the butcher’s blade had missed” (Ibid, 11). Knife fights and snarling dogs were a “miniature version of the barbaric way individual and social issues and rights are aired in our country” (Ibid, 11). A boy is beheaded by a rope attached to a bull in revolt, and the crowd barely notices the death before they chase after the bull, by which time the crowd was so riled that “one of the women lost control of her bowels, another said Hail Mary’s in two seconds flat, and two of them promised St. Benedict to give up their jobs as scavengers... No one knows if they kept their promises.” (Ibid, 14). After the bull is wrangled, the crowd, now with lust for more blood, notices a man whom they deem to be a “Unitarian dandy” and promptly knock him off his horse. The *caudillo* judge of the slaughterhouse instructs the crowd to take the man to a torture table, where “cards and drinking glasses were cleared only when tortures or executions by the Federalist henchmen of the slaughterhouse took place.” (Ibid, 17). The Unitarian dies in the struggle, much as the bull did, and Echeverría dispassionately remarks at the end that “it can clearly be seen that the focal point of the Federation was the slaughterhouse.” (Ibid, 21).

“The Slaughterhouse” pours over many of the same themes as Sarmiento, and as with *Facundo* a definite outside can be determined: the irrational and bloodthirsty rabble of the city, with racial overtones. It is a vignette of barbarism arriving at the city, *caudillo* culture set on the ill-suited stage of Buenos Aires, with the one figure representing civilization in the story literally dying not from violence, but from horror and outrage. In order to transform the city, liberal reformers had to establish a sovereignty that derived its authority from something other than direct violence. Hilda Sabato's excellent book *The Many and the Few* details that sovereignty began to look like with the formation of a bourgeois public sphere in Buenos Aires, drawing on the work of social theorist Jürgen Habermas. The public sphere is, for both Habermas and Sabato, a space where a small bourgeois group is able to participate in free discussion of art, culture, and politics that then comes to shape society, as well as legitimating public institutions through their origin in free debate. Writing near the time of Rosas fall, Sarmiento notes proudly that five hundred copies of *Facundo* were circulating the republic, showing a nascent seed of public discourse planted in an extremely select group (Sarmiento, 2005, 215). For context, Sabato informs us that the population of Buenos Aires alone was nearing three hundred thousand, so those five hundred copies of *Facundo* would have landed in the hands of a population that was characterized by literacy, access to an amount of free time for reading, and an interest in public debate (Sabato, 2001, 154). The limited scope of who was able to access the public sphere should be considered in both the case study of Buenos Aires as well as the historical model of the public sphere, as it reveals a wide gap between the narrowly selected “public” and the broader group of the “people”. Tracing the thought of German philosopher Immanuel Kant, Habermas argues the public sphere reflects both a juridical and practical order: the law enshrines the subject’s duty to the public, and the subject’s performance of public duty conversely grants the law legitimacy (Habermas, 1989, 115). This idea works on a hypothetical model if enfranchisement and full protection of the law is eventually extended to everyone; that is, if everyone can be made part of a public. The Argentine Constitution of 1853, which was critical to enshrining the public sphere, gives no reference to who the rights of citizenship are extended to; it is left ambiguous. When one hears Sarmiento tell us that the Argentine *gaucho*, due to geographic isolation, “lacks the basis for all social development; since the ranchers do not meet together, they have no public needs to satisfy; in a word, there is no *res publica*.”, it is not hard to imagine why the framers of the Argentine Constitution would have been hesitant to extend citizenship to everyone (Sarmiento, 2003, 55). The public sphere for Sarmiento could not extend to these people of the Pampas, therefore the legitimation of liberalism depended on their exclusion.

After the fall of Rosas, the press in Argentina expanded rapidly, numbering over a hundred papers a mere 30 years after the *caudillo*'s fall (Sabato, 43). An improvement over the circulation of news in the Rosas era, these papers appeared in different languages and with different ideological nuances, reflecting a number of the groups that would come to constitute the Argentine public sphere (Ibid, 47). In 1850, Sarmiento had written “Periodical publications are in our time like daily respiration; neither freedom, nor progress, nor culture is conceivable without this vehicle that links societies to one another.” (Sarmiento, 2005, 205) Yet it is not pure extensivity: Habermas reminds us that public debate was also predicated on the simultaneous existence of a private and intimate sphere, where privileged members of the bourgeoisie reflected on societal concerns and then extended those reflections outward into public discourse

(Habermas, 50). Newspapers were an outgrowth of this class, and eventually “the function of the bourgeois public sphere crystallized in the idea of ‘public opinion’” in the late 18th century (Ibid, 89). Similarly, Sabato shows us that the multitude of papers in Buenos Aires belied the small circle of individuals who ran them, and public opinion was important among the elites to legitimate political rule (Sabato, 51). This was because the Argentine press fostered a space where opinions could be discussed that “did not imply the contestation of government authority or political power”, providing a means for privileged members of the public to air grievances without implying a threat to the overall order of society (Ibid, 136).

In February of 1875, an angry mob burned down a Jesuit school in Buenos Aires, with *La Tribuna* writing that “these are not the events produced by a cultured and civilized people. No: that was the savage spirit of the rabble.” (Ibid, 144). *El Espanol* attributed the causes to “native elements that are used to electoral violence”, raising the familiar specter of the indigenous *gaucho* (Ibid, 145). Despite the finding of guilt at the hands of a racialized mob, the papers had been responsible for shaping and promulgating the Anti-Jesuit sentiments, going so far as to call for protests to Jesuit schools and referring to Jesuits as “vermin” and “assassins” (Ibid, 145). *La Tribuna* even wrote after the incident that “The memory of the excesses shall recede, sooner or later, but the protest against the advances of the Church will never die.” (Ibid, 152). At this point, the press was beginning to wield influence not just on the bourgeois class that contributed to it, but on a diverse group of literate and semi-literate city dwellers that was rapidly expanding by the time of the attack on the school of the attack on the school (Ibid, 154). It was no longer just the five hundred copies of *Facundo* circulating around the republic; it was rather an entire public relations industry that was reflexively shaping and molding the discourse of the city. Habermas illustrates how in Europe the degraded public sphere transforms from a space to mediate public opinion into a manufacturer of public opinion through public relations (Habermas, 221). Sarmiento, in a work written during his career as a politician, implored his fellow patricians that educating the masses should be done “Out of selfishness” to “blunt that instinct of destruction which is now dormant but which political life itself... must awaken.” (Sarmiento, 1948, 293). Sarmiento believed there was grave danger in exposing the uneducated masses to new forms of democratic participation, and that the violence that was endemic to the Rosas regime might resurface.

At the end of *Facundo*, Sarmiento writes that “The political doctrines that nourished the Unitarists up to 1829 were incomplete and insufficient for establishing a government and freedom; the Pampas stirred, and that was enough to make their edifice, based on sand, fall to the ground. This inexperience and lack of practical ideas were remedied by Rosas, in the minds of all, with the cruel and instructive lessons that his frightful despotism gave them.” (Sarmiento, 2003, 242). If Sarmiento sees the promises of the Unitarists (forbearers to Argentine liberalism) as unfulfilled, it is this new liberal public sphere that has formed as a corrective to the weaknesses of that former liberal regime. Yet Sarmiento informs us that Rosas will be remembered as “a great and powerful instrument of Providence, which accomplishes everything important for the future of our homeland”, for he has tamed the *caudillos* of the interior and “The day that a good government is established, it will find local resistance conquered and everything in place for the union.” (Ibid, 239). This is open to interpretation: could the liberal state that imagined in a

generation of writers and thinkers have come into being without the violence of the preceding years? If the foundation of the liberal state necessitated a period of violence, would a period of violence be necessary again, when societal contradictions reemerged?

Bearing Witness to the State of Exception

The Degradation of the Public Sphere

What can be seen throughout the development of the public sphere in Buenos Aires is not only the extension of citizenship and rights to a critical public, but also a delimitation of that public, and the spectre of beings excluded from the political, reduced to bare life. It is here again that we turn to a critique of the very notion of a public sphere. Habermas would admit that the access to the public sphere is restricted to certain sections of the bourgeoisie who have the time to engage with the multifarious strands of thought that were publicly blossoming (Habermas, 50). Yet the legitimacy of the public sphere as a source of sovereign authority derives from the active dialogue between all members of that public; paradoxically that public has been historically created through the designation of a limit of who is allowed to speak publicly. The rights of citizenship enshrined in the 1853 are a bold promise; yet it is a promise that is underscored by that documents ambivalent and decided silence on exactly who is a full citizen. This is a contradiction that never resolved itself in the Habermasian notion; instead the public sphere degrades and is turned from a space in which public opinion is formed through dialogue and becomes a space in which non-public opinions are manufactured and broadcast to a mass of people. Full access to the public sphere by the proletariat or peasant is never attained; this is the conclusion of Sabato as well, although she argues that it at the very least formed a space of mediation and negotiation. Without denying the subaltern voices of Buenos Aires in the 19th century, we can ultimately see that the promise of the public sphere, while grandiose, was ultimately unfulfilled.

As problems and contradictions inherent in mass politics began to arise in Argentine society in the early 20th century, the ghost of Sarmiento was revived throughout Ezequiel Estrada's fatalistic historical survey and social critique *X-Ray of the Pampa* (published 1933) as a way of understanding the predicament of the republic following a coup in 1930. Estrada returns to the desert, writing that "[the Pampa] is the land of disordered adventures in the fantasy of a shallow man", where "the coarse man discovers new beginnings" and "the cultivated man finds his end." (Estrada, 1971, 7). Yet the problems this time are not confined to the countryside, as following the 1853 revolution "residual elements of reaction took refuge in Buenos Aires (Ibid, 227). The "elements of reaction" that Estrada describes are the same that Echeverria diagnosed a hundred years earlier; a barbarism arrived at the city. Estrada in many ways reflects a final and frustrated culmination of the Argentine liberal: disillusioned with the people for being unable to accommodate to the contradictions and imbalances of a system that frequently denied them full personhood. Of course, Estrada does not ascribe these people a voice: his American *gaucho* was "a floating being, parasitically dependent on the cow and the horse, with nothing to restrain him in his ambitions or his career, since nothing knew bounds here – neither the law nor property nor life." (Ibid, 22). Estrada still sees a barbarian desert where "politics has no exit to well-structured forms", and instead "it projects its energies to the level of magic, of mysterious and arbitrary powers." (Ibid, 279). The social mores of the Pampas are not fixed in meaning or tradition, but are

rather transitory “pseudostructures, firm in the basic outlines of their physiognomies, but hollow in meaning and in substance.” (Ibid, 345).

Estrada's analysis reads as a 20th century version of *Facundo* but without the larger than life *caudillo* characters to frame it. Those characters are replaced in Estrada's analysis by the oppressive geography of the Pampas, the decaying Republican institutions and the hypermodern “bureaucratic organs” of the state, where libraries and schools become places where books are “removed from life and from reading, they line the walls and impose silence.” (Ibid, 363). He retraces Sarmiento's steps and notes obliquely that the Argentine people “are still in the Hesiodic period of improvisation when the poet is faced with the materials of reality but not with its problems”. (Ibid, 387). If Sarmiento's *cantor* was a figure of the Middle Ages, the poet of the modern Pampas is a figure from early Greece! The poet is, as always, the *caudillo*, “always the antiengineer, the technician of that anodyne reality, stronger than that reality and capable of stamping it with the bias of his talent as an improviser and a creator.” (Ibid, 388). Estrada goes on to tell us that “What Sarmiento did not realize was that civilization and barbarity were the same thing, like the centrifugal and centripetal forces of a system in equilibrium.” (Ibid, 398). The liberal reforms under Sarmiento did not stamp out the latter; instead “The defeated barbarity, with all its vices and its faults of structuring and of contents, had acquired an aspect of truth, of prosperity, and of cultural and mechanical advances.” (Estrada, 399).

Estrada was at the time one of the leading thinkers in Argentina, and the work, which advances a similar thesis to Sarmiento, made shockwaves at the time it was published. The idea that is important to keep sight of is that there might be people within the republic of Argentina who are incapable, due to an element of their nature, of being members of an enlightened or liberal government. For both Estrada and Sarmiento, the barbarism they saw boiling up in the Pampas was a product of backwards *caudillo* culture; Estrada suspected that one could not extricate barbarism from civilization as easily as Sarmiento hoped. Yet his pessimism is directed almost solely at the people and their mute resistance to civilizing elements: read as a contempt of the masses, he avoids structural critique in favor of fatalist aphorisms, tautological geographies, and hangs the fate of Argentina on the unchangeable nature of the *gaucho*.

Twenty years later in 1952 an American journalist covering the rise of Perónism, the populist political system associated with president Juan Perón, wrote, “Another dictator and his spectacular wife dominate the Argentine today”, before launching into a detailed parallel biographies of Juan Perón and Juan Rosas and their wives (Cowles, 1952, ix). The report that follows is a dubious and Sarmiento indebted sketch of Rosas coupled with a crude reading of how taken Perón was with European fascism and Stalinism and is the outcome of “the union of neo-fascism and communism” (Ibid, 246). While these remarks reflect media sensationalism more than anything else, Perón was so taken by both the Argentine and international media to be the second Rosas that it became a popular narrative of the Argentine bourgeoisie. *La Prensa*, a conservative Argentine daily newspaper that had had been founded in 1869, promoted these narratives and quickly came into the cross-hairs of the Perónist regime. After being charged with crimes against the nation, the paper published an editorial the next day that led with a Sarmiento quote “Barbarians! You cannot slaughter ideas.” and denounced “Anachronistic scenes, blind hatred persecuting ideas, gallows being raised.” (*Defense of Freedom*, 1952, 158, 162). On March 20,

1951 the paper was claimed by the state, although the editor filed a public protest decrying that “*La Prensa* has, for more than eighty years, served the Republic in the organization of its institutions, in the dissemination of information and culture among the people”, with “absolute impartiality” and any investigations will confirm the paper’s “moral authority” (Ibid, 177). The analysis in the previous section indicates that the formation of a public sphere in Argentina was, at best, incomplete, with popular opinion and populist politics being used as tools of the media to shape the political and social realm.

In *The Fourth Enemy*, James Cane explores the disintegration of the public sphere in Argentina, noting that the 1951 expropriation of the newspaper created a “public sphere devoid of the embarrassing indicator that the Peronist movement had yet to achieve the total consensus of all Argentines long claimed by its founder” (Cane, 2011, 226). He also argues that “the opposition increasingly found itself with little to gain by remaining within the bounds of Peronist legality and little to lose by stepping beyond them.” (Ibid, 226). Yet were the people, who long were denied a voice in the public sphere, actually the ones formulating an opposition? Ten years later, on the eve of another coup, the Argentine General Onganía addressed the Fifth Conference of American Armies at West Point in 1964, stating that the authority of government will be compromised under the influence of “exotic ideologies”, which present a threat “to the basic principles of a republican political system” (*Nunca Mas*, 1986, 386). He goes on to say “Since the people are powerless to exercise this right by themselves, it is the duty of the institutions which the people have armed and given to the mission to sustain the effective validity of the Constitution, to act on their behalf.” (Ibid, 444). Perónism and the reaction to it by Argentine elites is a hotly debated history that can be but briefly touched upon here to highlight that both Perón and his opponents appropriated the institutions and the ideals of republicanism, populism, and liberalism to further their political ends. Yet, tracing out a genealogy from Sarmiento, this cynicism and calculated use of the public is not a new occurrence in Argentine history. It is within the backdrop of this cynicism and escalating crises that we arrive at the 1976 coup and the Process of National Reorganization (PNR) (Rock, 1993, 224).

Bearing Witness to the *Desparecidos*

On March 24, 1976, the first day of the coup, the members of the Supreme Court of Argentina were suspended and replaced with judges hand selected by the junta, who “has to swear to uphold the Articles and objectives of the ‘Process’” (*Nunca Mas*, 386). The government during the PNR declared a “state of siege” to justify their free movement inside and outside the law; the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared (the Commission) declared that it is “inappropriate to talk of the authority of an illegal government in relation to the state of siege since this was intended to be use in the last resort to protect the legal state, and not... to legalize political persecution by a dictatorship which destroyed our republican institutions” (Ibid, 403). The contradictions here, while obvious, bear examination. The liberal republican government derives its authority from public institutions; yet, under a state of siege, the public’s access to those institutions can be suspended indefinitely until the crisis is over. The junta’s aims in the PNR and declaration of a state of siege were explicitly stated as protecting the ideals of the republic; yet the Commission deems those claim illegitimate because they suspended republican institutions, which occurs de facto in a state of siege. To analyze the state of exception from the

top down is to wrestle with ambiguity of sovereignty, when the sovereign is both inside and outside the law. The junta's declaration of a state of siege amounted to a simultaneous suspension of all laws and an extension of absolute law over the bodies of the Argentine people.

This is the reduction of beings to bare life, stripped of rights and in ambiguous relation to the law. As this paper has argued in its survey of Argentine intellectual history, this figure does not appear for the first time here. When Sarmiento stared plaintively at the Pampas and waxed on the incompatibility of the indigenous and black people with European progress, he etched that figure. That etching undoubtedly bore influence on the Argentine Constitution of 1853, which deliberately omitted any reference to whom citizenship was extended to, an ambiguous and precarious relationship to the law was enshrined for most subjects. The justifications any government gives for suspending liberty are always dubious, but liberalism in Argentina was formulated with a deep suspicion of the masses, and whether or not their habitudes and way of life would stand in the way of progress. At the time that the radical PNR began, it was again Argentines who, although allegedly under the influence of "exotic" ideologies, became excluded from the political order in the state of siege, giving the junta the flimsy legal justification to snuff out their liberty and lives.

Walter Meza Niella was 14 when the police raided his family's house in January of 1978. They struck him on the head with their rifles, knocking him to the ground, and then grab his still stunned body to use as a human shield while they searched his house for his father (Jaroskavsky, 32). Being held by the hair, he remembers when a soldier shouts "Aha! Look at the old man! I had an idea that he was a real Peronist, but he's got books by Karl Marx here." (Ibid, 32). He and his mother were then taken to a facility and tortured for information about the father, and suffered a brain aneurysm due to repeated head trauma (Ibid, 32). While recovering from the aneurysm, he learned that his father had managed to escape to Brazil, but was captured on his return to the country.

Luis Alberto Urquiza, a psychology student working for police intelligence services at the time of his arrest, testified "Francisco Gontero, who, from a distance of four or five meters, loaded his 45-calibre gun and fired three shots, one of which went through my right leg at the height of my knee... The same person then ripped my trousers and poked a stick and then his finger into the wound." (*Nunca Mas*, 28). He was released after two years detention for lack of evidence. Why was a psychology student who worked for the police tortured? The military regime had a disdain for psychoanalysis, as Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera stated in *La Opinion* in 1977 that "the inner intimacy of the human being was attacked by Freud, in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*" (Jaroslavsky, 100). Yet whether the target is Marx or Freud, the result is the same: the banishing of profane knowledge that threatens society by force, in this case the violence of the police under the military junta.

The bodies of the *desparecidos* were sent irregularly to cemeteries around Argentina (Nunca Mas, 231). Before arriving at the cemeteries they were often stored in unrefrigerated warehouses and lockers, typically arriving infested with maggots and in various stages of decomposition. There were never any names on the corpses; occasionally there would be the name of what policeman or police unit sent the corpse. Autopsies were banned on the bodies of political subversives, so little information was gathered about how they died. Stripped of names

and unreported, these anonymous deaths are what characterized the *desparecidos* and the form that law took in the state of exception, enacting itself on the surface of bare life. Pregnant women who were held at the Campo de Mayo Military Hospital were blindfolded and given Caesarean sections to accelerate births; their children were often never seen by them, instead raised by the staff of the hospital (Ibid, 295). In this sense there is an extension of the PNR over both life and death, and of course a vanquishing of all rights and recourse for former subjects now reduced to bare life.

Conclusions

In *Nunca Mas*, the official government report on the *desparecidos*, the Comission states that the doctrines behind repression were originating in the general movement to repress the influence of left-wing and communist movements that was encouraged and funded by the United States. The Argentine General Camps wrote in 1981 that “France and the United States were our main sources of counter-insurgency training. They organized centres for teaching counterinsurgency techniques and sent out instructors, observers, and an enormous amount of literature.” (Ibid, 442). Yet they do not turn a critical lens to that older imperialism of ideas, the migration of liberalism from France and England to the heady discussions on the streets of Buenos Aires in the 19th century. The US could not have aided in repression if the existing apparatus for repression did not exist, and that apparatus was not built overnight.

David Rock, in his influential *Authoritarian Argentina*, writes that the true source of the conflict was not Cold War ideological conflict but in fact a conflict between regressive Nationalist movements within Argentina, which “became the expression of deep-rooted historical forces in Argentina that continually challenged and resisted the mainstream liberal conceptions of the state and society” (Rock, xv). For Rock, the authoritarian and military regimes in Argentina never achieved a coherent ideology, and “Nationalists surfaced as major contenders for power only at times of threatened political breakdown”. (Ibid, xx). Highlighting the often incoherent and contradictory doctrines pushed forth by the military regime, at one moment denouncing “Marxist psychoanalysis in the universities” and at the next stating that “liberalism engenders communism”. (Ibid, 203). Agreeing with Rock that one cannot simply point to the United States as the culprit in Argentine affairs during the tumultuous years of repression and violence, and the impetus for the suspension of democratic rights must be found elsewhere.

Yet this paper disagrees with him that these right ideas were lurking in the shadows of Argentine society waiting for “periods of extreme political strain or breakdown”. Rather, these ideas were in plain sight within the framework of Argentine liberalism. To view the junta as an aberration or deviation is to ascribe to a historical tautology of liberal progress that fails to account for the elements within liberalism that produce the conditions for a state of exception to emerge. In contextualizing the junta in the larger history of Argentina, it must be understood that the grounds for exclusion of beings from the political did not originate solely from right wing or reactionary forces, but in fact was enshrined in the earliest doctrines of liberalism. In understanding how a state of exception emerged in Argentina in 1976, it is also necessary to understand the historical contingencies and continuities that flowed not from Rosas, but from the 1853 revolution.

Bibliography

- Adelman, Jeremy. 1999. *Republic of Capital: Buenos Aires and the Legal Transformation of the Atlantic World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Cane, James. 2011. *The Fourth Enemy: Journalism and Power in the Making of Peronist Argentina, 1930-1955*. University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Constitution of the Argentine Nation. 1853.
- Cowles, Fleur. 1952. *Bloody Precedent*. New York: Random House.
- Rock, David. 1993. *Authoritarian Argentina*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Defense of Freedom*. 1952. Compiled by the editors of *La Prensa*. New York: John Day Company.
- Estrada, Ezequiel Martinez. 1971. *X-Ray of the Pampa*. Translated by Alain Swietlicki. Austin: University of Texas Printing Division.
- Echeverria, Esteban. 1980. "The Slaughterhouse" in *The Spanish American Short Story: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Seymour Menton. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- de la Fuente, Ariel. 2000. *Children of Facundo: Caudillo and Gaucho Insurgency during the Argentine State-Formation Process*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Habermas, Jurgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Jaroslavsky, Andres. 2004. *The Future of Memory: Children of the Dictatorship in Argentina Speak*. London: Latin America Bureau.
- Nunca Mas: The Report of the Argentine National Commission of the Disappeared*. 1986. Compiled by Argentine National Commission of the Disappeared. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Sabato, Hilda. 2001. *The Many and the Few: Political Participation in Republican Buenos Aires*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Salvatore, Ricardo D. 2003. *Wandering Paysanos: State Order and Subaltern Experience in Buenos Aires During the Rosas Era*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino. 1948. *A Sarmiento Anthology*. Trans. Stuard Edgard Grummon. Ed. Allison Williams Bunkley. New Jersey: Princeton Press.
- Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino. 2003. *Facundo: Civilization or Barbarism*. Translated by Kathleen Ross. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino. 2005. *Recollections of a Provincial Past*. Translated by Elizabeth Garrels and Asa Zatz. Oxford: Oxford University Press.