

**Romero, L.A., 2013, *La larga crisis argentina. Del siglo XX al siglo XXI (Segunda edición)*, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Buenos Aires, pp. 144.**

After ten years, the renowned Argentine historian and public intellectual Luis Alberto Romero returns in this succinct but nevertheless very rich volume to the question that probably puzzles researchers in any country of the world: what trends, social phenomena, historical legacies etc. have contributed to the current state of a given polity?

The previous edition of this book was written during a very special period in the history of Argentina. On the one hand, between 1998 and 2002, the country suffered from unprecedented economic depression, which manifested itself with high unemployment, social unrest, institutional turmoil and a default on the country's foreign debt. On the other, in the first half of 2003 a surprising period of sustained and intense economic growth, combined with the return of relative political stability (in the form of administrations of Peronist presidents Eduardo Duhalde and Néstor Kirchner) has begun, mostly because of the devalued peso (its parity to the dollar was scrapped) and significant international demand for Argentina's agricultural production. Such factors, compounded with unusual levels of civic activity, contributed to Romero's cautious optimism with regard to the future prospects of his country, expressed in the following words:

Es posible, pues, que delante de nuestros ojos estén apareciendo formas de sociabilidad y de gestión de la política novedosas y creativas. Una medida prudente es mirarlas con seriedad e interés, y también con algo, no mucho, de esperanza (Romero, L.A., 2003, *La crisis argentina. Una mirada al siglo XX*, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Buenos Aires, p. 121).

It is tempting to ask: what is Romero's diagnosis now, is there anything left of the new and creative forms of sociability and politics mentioned ten years ago? (It is important to note that the discussed book was published two years before the end of the second consecutive presidential term of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner; it means that the 25 October 2015 election – at least for a foreseeable future – will put an end to the presidential power of the Kirchner family).

Not much and what is more, nowadays his optimism seems to be even more cautious. In Romero's opinion the harshest consequences of the 2003 crisis have obviously been overcome. At the same time, however, unexpected opportunities offered by a period of economic growth did not serve as a chance to end the vicious circle of prolonged decline that has affected Argentina over the last forty years. As a result, the institutions of the state are still inefficient and subjugated to executive power (as Romero bitterly observes, "Durante los años de Kirchner, la concentración de poder en el Ejecutivo siguió avanzando, las instituciones republicanas retrocedieron y se consolidó el gobierno decisionista"; to better grasp the legal nature of this process he uses the concept of "emergencia permanente" coined by Hugo Quiroga). The periodic affluence was/is redistributed to mitigate the most pressing of social problems, but at the same time the investments necessary to sustain and diversify sources of economic growth in the future are scarce. The robust democratic political culture that emerged in the period after 1983 (with its roots reaching back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) is inhibited by the above mentioned "hiperpresidencialismo," the government's hostility towards private media and the fragile party system. Clientelism and corruption seem to be rife. And in spite of the fact that the federal system of government has functioned in Argentina since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the federal culture is shallow and negatively affected by almost all of the phenomena listed above.

As has already been suggested, Romero is of the opinion that the numerous weaknesses of contemporary Argentina have deep historical roots. In order to explain them and organize the narration, he uses a chronological-problematic approach. As a consequence, it is clearly shown, that – for example – the symptoms of the future democratic deficit can be traced back to the controversial legacies of the democratically elected and popular presidents Hipólito Yrigoyen and Juan Domingo Perón. The same can be said with regard to clientelism (clearly visible and firmly established in the relationships between the federal center and the provinces) or the general weakness of the state (during the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was periodically enhanced by military coups – six of them in total).

In the opinion of the present reviewer, Romero's interpretation of Argentina's permanent crisis is important not only because it is

convincingly argued and well-written. This book also invites the reader to think about historical comparisons and parallels. Probably at first sight the comparison between Poland and Argentina might be considered as far-fetched, but in spite of some obvious differences (e.g. a multicultural, post-immigrant society in Argentina and a homogenous society in Poland), the similarities are quite striking: the peripheral (or at best semi-peripheral) status in the world-system; the legacy of imperial domination (American in the case of Argentina, Soviet in the case of Poland); the painful experience of recent military dictatorship (Proceso de Reorganización Nacional in Argentina and the martial law in Poland); the presence of political parties/groups striving to present themselves as the only successors of the past mass-movements and their ideologies (the ideals of Peronism in Argentina and the ideals of Solidarity in Poland); the high intensity of political rivalry combined with calls to delegitimize opponents, an underdeveloped civil society etc. Of course, Latin American and East-Central European states have been compared in the past, but probably there is a lot more to be undertaken in this somewhat neglected field.

In 2002 Colin M. Lewis, a professor at the University College London Institute of the Americas, concluded his brief history of Argentina with the following words:

Argentines have been ill-served by their politicians, who for too long have seemed to represent a state that stood above society, or were themselves detached from that society. But it is society at large that has to devise a political arrangement that facilitates participation, and a pluralist debate that generates solutions to issues such as resource creation and use (Lewis, C.M., 2002, *Argentina. A Short History*, One-world Publications, Oxford, p. 234).

It can certainly be argued that with this brilliant volume the Argentines are rather well-served by one of their academics/intellectuals. However, a crucial question still remains unanswered: will they be willing to engage with his thoughts, in order to begin their long journey towards “un país normal?”

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