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# POINTS OF THE COMPASS

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*Letter from Argentina*

## The Lost Country

By James Neilson



TOWARDS THE end of May Argentines learned, with resignation rather than surprise, that they had just come within two minutes of war over some bedraggled islands in the South Atlantic. On this occasion the islands in question were not the Falklands, but three unprepossessing outcrops in the mouth of the Beagle Channel called Lennox, Picton, and Nueva; and the prospective enemy was not Great Britain but Chile. The incident, which occurred when a malfunctioning Argentine helicopter strayed across the frontier, thrilled a few nationalists and alarmed a great many other people. But, although the danger of a war with Chile remains considerable, it was quickly forgotten.

Argentines have been sated with bad news for so long that it now takes much more than the possibility of a mere war to move them. Hardly a week goes by without them being confronted by some new and quite appalling revelation of military wrongdoing or some additional evidence that their economy is doomed to collapse in the not very distant future. They are, in consequence, apprehensive and bewildered and feel that they are trapped in a maelstrom, rushing towards an unknown, but surely unpleasant, destination. Few really try to make sense of the chaotic flux that is sweeping them along. And the analyses of those who do are so divergent, and so pessimistic, that they merely intensify the mood of grim foreboding that seems to have overcome the entire nation.

For example, one of the country's best-known columnists, Jesus Iglesias Rouco of *La Prensa*, is

convinced that Argentina is heading for what he calls "Lebanonisation", a state of affairs in which rival armies prowl the land, seizing parts of it and holding the inhabitants hostage. A lucid conservative like Emilio Hardoy says that an age is coming to an end. Alvaro Alsogaray, Argentina's most persuasive advocate of free-market economic policies, recently warned his fellow countrymen that before long they might fall under "an iron hand, probably of communist extraction." The country's most prominent politician, the Radical Raúl Alfonsín, however, thinks that the iron hand will be fascist.

The diversity of opinions concerning Argentina's likely fate is accompanied by a similar diversity of views concerning the reasons for its plight. These, naturally enough, reflect the political attitudes of the people expressing them. Dedicated anti-Peronists pin the blame for every setback on the late General Juan Domingo Perón who, together with his second wife Evita, established a "corporate" state dominated by organised "sectors" (the most powerful of which are the armed forces and the labour unions), which has resisted all attempts to dismantle it since Perón's overthrow in 1955. Peronists, and many leftwingers, deny this vehemently. They insist that Argentina's troubles are the work of the CIA or the Trilateral Commission which, they say, have always manipulated its soldiers and businessmen in order to achieve their aim of transforming the country into a gigantic agricultural reserve without any industry that could disturb the sleep of the plutocrats in Detroit, Manchester, or Osaka.

These conspiratorial explanations, repeated knowingly day in and day out by respected politicians and journalists, may contribute as little to our understanding of the Argentine situation as the apocalyptic predictions of the commentators. But they do tell us quite a lot about the Argentine ruling class or "establishment", the network of military officers, labour union leaders, politicians and others, who quarrel ferociously among themselves but nonetheless know one another, take one another's behaviour for granted, and, whether they like it or not, support a political order that has proven to be extremely resilient.

ALTHOUGH, ON THE SURFACE, Argentina has always seemed to be a flamboyantly unstable society, it has demonstrated an astonishing capacity for resisting change. Despite the superficial theatricals of military coups which are described by their authors as "revolutions" and the sporadic irruptions of such noisy mass movements as Peronism, Argentina possesses a durable political order which up to now has worked in a fairly predictable way, with military régimes supposedly devoted to capital formation alternating regularly with popu-

list governments bent on distributing whatever is available to whomever their leaders think deserves it.

This arrangement, privately admitted though publicly deplored, has, like the democratic system in other lands, its own underlying rhythm, its own dynamic; and it enables power to be shifted backwards and forwards between two accepted alternatives in a passably regular, and rarely very painful, fashion. By the time a military régime had become unpopular, a civilian government—to be legitimised by elections, not by a coup—was ready and waiting to take over; and by the time its failure to satisfy expectations had become manifest, a consensus had formed to the effect that what Argentina needed was a spell of stern military rule to restore order and get business moving again. Thus, although some Argentines were always disgruntled, more were always investing their hopes in the civilian or military government they could see approaching.

But now, thanks in large measure to the merciless “struggle against subversion” waged by the armed forces in the second half of the 1970s, the system has broken down. The military officers cannot, as they did so often in the past, withdraw to their barracks and let the civilians try their hand at “democracy” for a while. If they did, they would find themselves ordered to appear in court and explain to hostile judges what they did to the 10–30,000 people—significantly, nobody knows the real figure—who were kidnapped, tortured, and murdered during what is now universally known as “the dirty war.” During this anarchic period, moreover, some officers took advantage of the prevailing confusion and fear to settle old scores with personal enemies, inconvenient business partners, and amatory rivals. There are, in addition, large numbers of charges of corruption flying around, although the people making them still tend to avoid saying precisely whom they think stole the money involved.

THE MILITARY CHIEFS are utterly determined to prevent the courts from investigating the fate of “the disappeared” because they know that this would quickly lead to the dismantling of the armed forces. It was not, after all, as though the atrocities had been committed by a few fanatics or sadists. The brutal tactics adopted by the military had all been devised and approved by the senior commanders, and were enshrined in written documents as “doctrine.” The men who actually tortured and killed were simply following orders from above, and they have let it be known that they can prove this. There was, moreover, no Argentine equivalent of the SS whose “excesses” could be deplored and disowned by the equivalent of the *Wehrmacht*. From the beginning the military

chiefs did their best to ensure that as many units as possible would be involved in their repressive activities in order to prevent their forces dividing into parts which had much blood on their hands and parts which were relatively clean. Responsibility for the crimes of “the dirty war” is, the military chiefs proclaim, in consequence institutional.

The ideologues of the military régime always appreciated that, because of “the dirty war”, there could be no going back, that they had burnt their boats. But this did not alarm them. They thought that the principal error of previous military régimes had been to give up too easily, so if a reluctance to face civilian justice helped put some steel in the military backbone, so much the better. They also assumed that the *process*, as they called their government, would succeed; that Argentines, freed from the terrorist plague, would be richer and happier, and that the military government would have little difficulty in retaining power for a generation and would then be able to bequeath it to a conservative political movement of their own creation.

THE “PROCESS” RÉGIME proved as incapable of changing the rhythms of Argentine politics as those that preceded it, and before long public approbation turned into public distaste—the economic “miracle” of the first years was seen to be a sorry fraud, and the military chiefs began to realise that the time was coming when they ought to leave. Had it not been for “the dirty war” they would have done so years ago and the Falklands War, among many other things, would never have taken place. But, caught in a trap of their own making, they have been forced to stay in power even though their authority, and with it their ability to rule, has eroded rapidly.

Most of their actions since 1981 have been determined by their need to persuade the civilian population in general, and opposition politicians and human rights activists in particular to overlook “the dirty war.” When the first “process” president, General Jorge Rafael Videla, finished his term he was replaced by his friend General Roberto Viola, who promptly tried to knit together a political coalition that would have included some friendly Peronists. His efforts, overshadowed by a developing economic crisis, alarmed right-wingers like General Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri, so they removed him and put Galtieri in his place. Galtieri, a man with a more grandiose outlook than Viola, dreamed of restoring military prestige, and thus silencing demands for a full investigation of “the dirty war”, through a spectacular *coup de main* in the Falklands, which have for years been the focus of the national cult of total sovereignty. When this

failed too, Galtieri fell and his successors (led by the new army commander-in-chief General Cristino Nicolaides and his president, General Reynaldo Bignone) tried a new tack: Argentines could have the civilian democracy they obviously craved but would first have to agree to a number of conditions, principally a commitment not to pry into "the dirty war."

By then Argentine public opinion, contemptuous of the military after the Falklands débâcle, hurt by the swift drop in the standard of living, and frustrated by the excessively long suspension of civil liberties, was in no mood to make any kind of deal with the military. The political leaders turned that military offer down flat. A few months later the military tried again, issuing what they said was their "final statement" on "the dirty war", in which, after justifying it by describing the crimes of the terrorists and the threat they had presented, it was announced that henceforward only God and History would be allowed to sit in judgment over military actions.

This desperate attempt to end a chapter was rejected with derision not just by Argentines but by foreign leaders, including the Italian President, Sandro Pettrini, who took exception to its "chilling cynicism", Pope John Paul II, the European Parliament, and the governments of Spain, West Germany, France and Sweden. The military decision to dictate an "amnesty" that would benefit themselves has also been fiercely attacked by Argentine and foreign leaders.

SO THE "HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEM" remains unsolved and it looks insoluble. If the big civilian political parties agree to let the military get away scot-free, they will discredit themselves and abdicate many of their constitutional prerogatives. If they do not, they will find themselves involved in a confrontation with the armed forces—which will either rebel as a whole or tacitly encourage individual officers to conduct a campaign of intimidation impressive enough to cow civilian leaders into silence.

**E**VEN IF "THE DIRTY WAR" had never occurred, the chances of democracy flourishing on Argentine soil in the foreseeable future would not be very good. The biggest civilian political movement, Peronism, is authoritarian by tradition and temperament and has as little respect for the constitutional niceties as the military themselves. The Peronists demonstrated this during their first period in power between 1946 and 1955, then between 1973 and 1976; they are demonstrating it again during the desultory election campaign that is still in progress and, barring mishaps, should

culminate when the polling booths are open on October 30. The Peronists seem to enjoy the support of at least 40% of the electorate, and take it for granted that they will romp to power in any fair elections. But in Argentina the president and vice-president are chosen not by direct vote in a first-past-the-post system but by an Electoral College. The Peronists fear, with good reason, that the representatives of the other 60% or so of the voting population will combine against them and cheat them of the victory they believe is theirs by right. So they have been virulently denouncing the electoral system—the constitutional one, as it happens—and threaten civil war if they are thwarted. Some Peronist leaders, moreover, have been busily negotiating with senior army officers in an attempt to work out a secret alliance that will, in exchange for giving the military the protection from prosecution they want, provide the Peronists with military backing whenever they should need it.

When Juan Domingo Perón went to his grave in 1974 it was widely assumed that his movement would quickly follow him. That it has not done so is largely the fault of the military régime, which removed the dithering Isabel Perón from Government House in March 1976, and overnight transformed the Peronists from villains into martyrs. As long as it is in opposition and is under no obligation to make any clear-cut decisions, the Peronist movement is able to stick together—Maoists manage to coexist with Hitlerians, socialists with crusty old Tories, and moderates with thugs. But in power Peronism, bereft of its one unifying factor, Juan Perón, is bound to fall apart as it did in 1975, provoking a frantic struggle for key positions among the leaders of the disparate factions that compose it. In the past this struggle has generally been won by the movement's least reputable elements, individuals who prefer force to persuasion. Nothing that has happened in the last few months suggests that this is about to change.

PERONISM, IN THE WORDS of one of its leading moderates, Antonio Cafiero, is a national movement which aspires to absorb all "sectors" and all political expressions of Argentine life. When pressed for a snappy definition of their movement, Peronists are usually reduced to saying: "*Peronism is Argentina . . . Peronism is the people . . . Peronism is social justice.*" Beyond this they cannot go because, apart from the difficulties involved in summing up a movement that contrives to be all things to all men, any answer that is too specific will also be divisive, infuriating those Peronists who have a very different idea of the movement's secret essence.

**I**F PERONISM SEEMS TO BE an impossible option, what about Radicalism? This is the country's second largest political movement, and enjoys the support, the polls indicate, of between 25 to 30% of the electorate. Unlike the Peronists, the Radicals are genuine democrats who respect the law and the Constitution even when it stands in their way, and their leaders, men like Alfonsín and Fernando de la Rúa, are competent men. Nobody, however, thinks that even if by some miracle they did manage to win office, they would be able to handle either the military or the Peronists—let alone both of them together.

Military determination to defend accumulated privileges and the Peronists' belief that they are the only genuine expression of the Argentine will and therefore entitled to rule would seem enough to be getting on with, but the Radicals would also have to tackle Argentina's monstrous economic crisis. The inflation rate has recently been running at 400% a year, moving higher as the military régime's ability to impose discipline has diminished. The foreign debt, at 40 billion dollars a year (helped by military spending of, it is said, 15 billion dollars in the last two years alone) is in present circumstances unpayable. The government's income from taxation has been dropping fast, Argentines being unable or unwilling to attend to its needs any longer.

Living standards continue to fall, and the labour unions, dominated by Peronists, are in a very angry mood. Radical leaders, like most others, pretend that they will be able to handle this mess without reducing the overall standard of living still further, or causing politically intolerable hardship for anyone. But nobody elsewhere has yet discovered a painless cure for inflation and, if anyone ever does, he is unlikely to be an Argentine politician. Sooner rather than later, living standards seem bound to collapse, provoking riots and panic, and quite possibly enabling the extreme left, which has been industriously working away at shop-floor level, to achieve its cherished dream of organising a "Revolutionary General Strike."

**I**S ARGENTINA DRIFTING towards a real revolution that would destroy its worn-out traditional political system and substitute something else?

Even the gloomiest Cassandras, for all their willingness to prophesy catastrophe, cannot quite bring themselves to believe this. But then few of the inhabitants of Czar Nicholas's Russia or the Shah's Iran were convinced, until it was too late, that the familiar order which had survived so many vicissitudes would one day crumble into dust. In retrospect, the omens were evident: the ruling class was not merely despised by the ruled for its

incompetence and corruption, it had come to despise itself and this corroded its morale, its willingness to resist those who would consign it to the scrap-heap of history. Although the survivors' memories were inevitably affected by what came later, many described the brooding, distraught atmosphere that pervaded every cranny of their world. If the literature is anything to go by, the similarity between the mood of Argentines, especially of those accustomed to play some part in public affairs, and that of the Russian bourgeoisie or aristocracy three-quarters of a century ago, is considerable. They have lost faith in themselves, in their ability to steer events; like prisoners of an unpredictable tyrant, they wait nervously to see what will happen.

Argentines have always been vulnerable to bouts of euphoria that are soon followed by periods of utter despair. Now, like the doomed élites of countries later afflicted by revolution, the ruling class has wilfully cut itself away from reality and retreated to contemplate its own self-indulgent fantasies. As a collective entity it displays in abundance symptoms that in an individual would announce an imminent mental breakdown. Needless to say, the fantasies vary in accordance with political preference, but most of them involve the paranoid suspicion that the country is a hapless victim of obscure foreign plots, with events determined by what many call a "black hand." There is also, in most circles, a refusal to accept natural limitations: military officers and government spokesmen often speak as though Argentina had won the war against Great Britain; and most civilian politicians insist that prosperity would return if only wages were "restored" by decree to their "historic levels", twice as high as today's. All this suggests that Argentina's élite has become more than slightly deranged, certainly unable to cope with the difficulties besieging it and, of course, the rest of the country.

THE DECAY OF Argentina's ruling class, which began long before the armed forces took power, to loud applause, in 1976, has been paralleled by the decay of Argentina as an organised community. The three armed forces are divided into factions and lodges and secret cabals, which hug to themselves their separate schemes for national regeneration. They are also divided horizontally, with the lower-ranking officers deploring the incompetence and corruption and lack of patriotic fibre of their seniors. The political parties are likewise divided, as are the labour unions and professional associations, and so on right down to sports clubs and families.

These divisions are far deeper than the differences that are taken for granted in any pluralistic society. They are often irreconcilable and serve to

paralyse rather than invigorate. Millions of individuals have reacted to the prevailing anarchy by retreating into their private lives, concerning themselves with their families and their friends, and nothing else. Military chiefs and political leaders, appreciating the dangers inherent in such "dissociation", have campaigned in favour of more "participation" and bemoaned the general apathy; but to little effect. Many young Argentines have tried very hard to respond but, frustrated by the sheer number of purportedly representative organisations and by the limpet-like determination of their present leaders to maintain their positions, most have given up the attempt and returned to their own affairs; or, if they are enterprising and think they have marketable skills, have emigrated.

**A**RGENTINES ARE BY NATURE an energetic, innovative, and talented people; if they were well governed, they would have little difficulty in building a flourishing society. But for decades they have been ruled by individuals whose ability to win power bears no relationship to the capacity to use it wisely and well.

No doubt the man in the street must share part of the blame for allowing such a *kakistocracy*, a government of the worst, to entrench itself. The reasons why this has happened are, of course, complex, and it is only fair to point out that other countries which have tried to industrialise rapidly—Germany, Italy, Japan—have all gone through periods in which demagogic thugs managed not only to seize power but to capture the imaginations of many of their fellow citizens as well. Germany, Italy, and Japan were defeated in war and occupied by the victors, who enforced changes which they thought would be positive and which

were later accepted by their beneficiaries. But Argentina has never been defeated in such a conclusive fashion, let alone occupied by a democracy; so its old order has managed to remain.

How much longer it will succeed in doing so is, however, an open question. If the rot continues, a moment will surely arrive when the sorely tried population of the country will turn its back on its civilian leadership as rudely as it has turned its back on the armed forces, and welcome virtually any alternative as long as it looks sufficiently different.

Most revolutions have been preceded by the disgrace of a ruling class that was too ostentatiously greedy and incompetent at home, and unable to conduct a successful war—or some political equivalent of war—against foreigners. Incapable of performing its basic functions, it became irrelevant. Then, sometimes years after this has become obvious, its authority finally collapses and it tries to make peace with opposition leaders it once jailed or exiled—because, despite everything, they seem comfortingly moderate. By then these opposition leaders, who have coexisted for years with the *ancien régime*, have become identified with it in the public mind and they too are rejected in favour of other, previously unknown leaders, who seem to have no doubts about what they want.

Argentina has not reached this revolutionary stage as yet. The discredited military régime is preparing to pass power to traditional politicians who are still regarded, although with little enthusiasm, as the natural recipients. Should the Radicals and Peronists falter, as their performance in the past and the magnitude of the difficulties they will have to face suggest is probable, Argentina could all too easily start to slide into an upheaval which few really want but an increasing number sense is rapidly approaching.

## Boredom

This winter the ice  
tightens the lake  
six inches thick.

You walk across the water  
waving to me like  
a woman lost awake

from a dream in a lonely hotel.  
How I love you! I'd write a poem about it  
but the very thought of it leaves me cold.

*Michael Hulse*