

LA ARGENTINA AUSENTE*

Juan Eugenio Corradi

In a lecture on "The Present State of Fiction in Latin America," delivered in Norman, Oklahoma, in 1975, Julio Cortázar spoke in two voices. He exempted the fantastic literature of the River Plate from social and cultural interpretations of the reductive kind. On this point I shall not dwell. I shall simply endorse it, and add: As a positive discipline, sociology seeks to extract a truth of some kind from literature, but literature wishes to subtract its truth from any discipline, and to lodge its claims elsewhere. As Cortázar implied, the issue then is not the relative difficulty or the possible success of a sociological interpretation, but the manner in which literature ultimately triumphs over it, eschewing reduction, unsettling established truths, dissolving classifications, annulling many a paradigm. Literature is the catastrophe of interpretations.

At the end of Cortázar's lecture, however, the writer seemed to impersonate, or at least to solicit the aid of, the sociologist, as the writer cast a glance upon the horrors of real history, the history that includes both writer and sociologist, the history that requires interpretation and that demands participation. In this role, with this other voice, Cortázar said:

"... in contrast to a literature of the startling, which enriches us in the measure in which it accepts and cultivates a rupture with the excessive pragmatism of reality and reason, history does not seem ever to have received a dose of the fantastic without precipitating the worst catastrophes. [...] Argentine history would seem to have consisted for many decades of orienting its mirrors towards impracticable European models [. . .] In this way, many Argentines accepted an existence in which what was truly ours, from the color of our skin to our authentic language, was denied by a Europeanizing education which made us uncertain and vulnerable. [. . .]

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At present [...] the house of cards has collapsed [...] and we are witnessing in conditions which are almost always horrible, the anguished search for our identity, for our necessary and irreplaceable reality."*

Sociology stands interpellated by this reflection, and it should respond by offering its own narrative of the pseudomorphic history to which Cortázar pointed. In the pages that follow, I propose a version of that narrative, an exercise in redescription accomplished with the tools of my craft, so as to join the writer, for at least part of the same way, in the search for that "necessary and irreplaceable reality." Thus, I will not treat the Argentina that is, or is not, present in the literary text, but the sociological country that, roughly since Cortázar left it, in the fifties, has stumbled from one decade to the next, mostly absent from itself, into its present sorry predicament.

The narrative that I propose is divided into four parts. The first explores the cultural malaise that seized middle-class society since the fifties and which gave rise to extreme forms of crisis behavior during the past decade. The second describes the failure of political solutions to the protracted social crisis, the erosion of legitimacy, the collapse of institutions, in short, the impossible governance of a volatile society. The third attempts to account for the weakness of social bonds and for the thinness of the moral fabric. Finally, the fourth portrays aspects of the terroristic order that has descended, like a frost, on Argentina. The early seventies, which mark the return of Peronism, will serve as a pivot for the narrative. The latter telescopes backwards to the fifties and forwards to the eighties. It is primarily concerned with the history of civil society during these decades, with its figures and its metaphors.

*Julio Cortázar, "The Present State of Fiction in Latin America," in Jaime Alazraki and Ivar Ivask, eds., *The Final Island. The Fiction of Julio Cortázar*, Norman: Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1976, p. 36.

I

Culture

"... entrar escoba en mano en una casa sucia para limpiarle el polvo de mucha ignominia, de mucha hipocresía."

Ultimo Round, II, 56

"Para nosotros, digamos para la Joda, todas las armas eficaces son válidas porque sabemos que tenemos razón y que estamos acorralados por dentro y por fuera, por los gorilas y los yanquis o incluso por la pasividad de esos millones que esperan siempre que otros saquen las castañas del fuego."

Libro de Manuel, 262

A landslide majority carried Juan Perón from exile back to power in 1973. Given a chance to express their views freely after a long period of interdiction and chicanery, Argentines opted for the wholesale rejection of the previous eighteen years, and put their hopes once again on the old *líder*. As a balance of a whole epoch of military coups and civilian administrations, the results of those elections were resounding and conclusive. This near-plebiscite also discharged on the political arena a torrent of old and new frustrations developed over the erratic and dammed-up course followed by Argentina since 1955.

A collective figure begun to impose itself at that point —a character that took shape during the years preceding 1973 and whose entrance on the scene helped set the tone of the second Peronist era. Looking back at the forces rallied around Perón in 1973 we find more than the mere presence of his traditional supporters, i.e. the working class and more generally the masses. Behind Peronism's impressive electoral victory there were also large contingents of middle-class sectors that has abandoned their former political loyalties to gather around Perón's return to power. I will here dwell on this transfer of middle-class allegiances in favor of Peronism. The shift was exemplified by the role played by the Peronist youth in the years preceding the political events of 1973. Recruited among university and high-school students, the Peronist youth placed its hopes for political renewal in Perón, thus making a complete about-turn from what had been the traditional political views of the sectors of society to which they belonged. The magnitude of this change appears clearly once we recall that the whole of middle-class Argentina was against Peronism in 1955 and that at the time university stu-

dents were the vanguard of a civilian opposition that contributed to the overthrow of the populist regime. We could say, roughly, that the children of those who had opposed Perón now turned their backs to their parents and embraced the very cause that the latter once resisted. Thus, whereas for the lower classes the return of Peronism meant the vindication of old political convictions, for the young newcomers to the movement it was a gesture of political parricide. I do not need to belabor the importance of this last drama that enveloped Argentina in a wave of violence for which it was hardly prepared. The survival of Peronism among the laboring classes is comprehensible in the light of the social and political history of Argentina. In the forties Peronism presided over the incorporation of the workers into the political system and promoted their socio-economic advance. As is usually the case with the formation of new social movements, that early and crucial collective experience left its imprint in the collective memory and therefore in the political consciousness of the Argentine working class; it was truly its birthmark. Despite their repeated attempts at coercion and/or cooptation, the regimes—civilian and military—that succeeded Peron's could not erase that primary political loyalty. In fact, the policies pursued by such regimes over the course of eighteen years served to confirm that loyalty. But how to account for the new youth movement that arose from the very core of middle-class Argentina, spread like a fire in the prairies, and progressively broke all ties with established political practices? What are the sources of this abstract (and violent) consciousness?

Perhaps the best way to tackle the question is to take a few steps back and trace the roots of this unprecedented break. A glance over the map suggests that this violent form of radicalization appears in countries which, for quite dissimilar reasons, have experienced an uncontrolled social development, with the ensuing disequilibrium in the mechanisms of government. It is possible to attribute this deregulation to a general decline in capitalist rationality (exacerbated in dependent countries) in the West. In any event, for the specific case of Argentina, a historical, retrospective glance may be an antidote to perplexity and disquiet, and especially to the kind of exorcism through which people abdicate both understanding and responsibility. Indeed, many have seen the irruption of the radicalized youth in Argentine politics as a hurricane coming through the window of a peaceful home. The anger expressed by the youth, their 'abstract consciousness' has been treated as a sort of *deus ex machina*. Yet, despite such interpretations, we cannot deny that the attitudes and proposals displayed by the Peronist youth were intimately linked to the avatars of Argentine development over a long span of time. Going back to the fifties (the period when this youth was born) we observe that Argentina was undergoing a new wave of modernization affecting many institutions—among them education and the family—and resulting in the transformation of the cultural climate of the country. From 1940 to 1955,

Argentina had lived culturally cloistered. The first Peronist era had sponsored a certain return to the 'autochthonous,' and had spurned the 'cosmopolitanism' that had accompanied previous moments of growth. The demise of Perón's regime then opened the gates to the reception of contemporary trends and fashions. The middle class now eagerly embraced cultural practices and products that for long years they had been allowed to taste surreptitiously at best. The intellectuals that had been dislodged by the Peronist regime now devoted their efforts to update the circuits of production and consumption of knowledge, in an attempt sometimes to imitate, sometimes to catch up with, international standards of proficiency. Their project of cultural renovation coincided with the modernizing impulse promoted by such governments as Frondizi's administration, and which came to be known as *desarrollismo*. The wish to renovate culture seized the universities and radiated from them to the larger world of the middle-class. Literature and the arts received a new boost, while entirely new modes of inquiry and expression were explored and then rapidly diffused. Psychoanalysis (never exempt from an aura of chic voodooism) signified best the experience of these groups —as a novel curiosity, as a symbol of change, and as an attempt to come to terms with the consequences of that change. To grow up in such a climate meant, for the middle-class child of the fifties, to receive more fully the brunt of the new cultural trends, to face a wide set of choices, but also a more uncertain future, than any of his or her forebears. What needs to be added is that, like so many currents of reform in the Argentine past, the modernization that led this new generation into uncharted territories failed to encompass the whole society. Old traditions may have suffered serious setbacks, but they managed to survive, mixed with the new like oil mixes with water. Survivors and newcomers were thrown together in haste, geared for the dramatic confrontations that would rock the country later on.

A second process to be noted in the late fifties is the *disarticulation of political language* that was taking place at the very heights of power. The political elites that at the time put forward the idea of development, found the formulas inherited from the past largely unusable. It was thus in the register of official discourse that the political effects of modernization were first inscribed. Old words received new meanings; terms belonging to disparate universes of discourse were transposed and combined; former antinomies were wedded and welded. A bizarre discursive *bricolage* accompanied a no less daring act of political *combinazioni* —an art in which the then president Frondizi excelled and for which he came, eventually, to be almost universally distrusted. For the *desarrollista* elites, 'liberation' was no longer incompatible with 'dependency.' Frondizi —who once wrote a nationalist tract on oil policy— felt free to announce that in order to rid the country of the tutelage of the imperialist Big Brother, he would grant generous concessions to several of the Big Sisters. Small wonder then that this perverse dialectic would later find a fateful echo

among those who would advocate violence as a means to attain pacification: *si vis pacem para bellum* (as interpreted by la Joda). Such stretching exercises in political discourse puzzled an older generation of Argentines accustomed to hear the familiar sounds of separate ideologies. Frondizi (and those like him) introduced a new tension in the prevailing political style —a fundamental dissonance in the context of old cadences. Best intentions notwithstanding, neither he nor those who succeeded him in the exercise of power provided a resolution, a satisfying synthesis. Far from it, political discourse in Argentina moved toward a dangerous freedom from all consonance, from the obligation to resolve the dissonance. Eventually, almost any combination of notes was to be admitted, and the country moved farther and farther away from releasing tension in rational ways. From this refusal of resolution came —ten years after Frondizi— the aptness of the discourse and style of the radicalized middle-class youth for the enactment of anguish and the macabre, as for example in General Aramburu's kidnapping, execution, and further kidnapping of the corpse.

The precipitating factors just reviewed must be now placed in the wider context of global Argentine society, characterized by the weakness of social loyalties on the one hand, and by a protracted institutional crisis, on the other. In words that others may find more familiar or congenial, this process can also be described as the inability of any social class to gain ideological hegemony over society, and thus to assure its own legitimacy in the running of the state. These two features tend to reinforce each other and result in a vicious circle. Suffice it to say here that the rapid, inorganic development of Argentina had put, side by side, groups that failed to speak the same political language or include others in their own universe of discourse. Given such dissonance of political voices, a heavy premium is placed on the distribution of resources, while social stability rests on the performance of institutions, on the reiteration of multiple pay-offs; in short, on the fragile capacity to 'deliver the goods.' Where hegemonic values cannot cement the social order, only the perspective of a simultaneous satisfaction of concrete interests keeps the whole together. Now it was precisely this capacity of institutions that began to falter after 1955, and in the following eighteen years the process eroded their credibility as places wherein to pursue meaningful lives, as platforms from which to have an input in national life. From the days of Frondizi, through the years of Onganía, to the return of Perón, political disorder and economic crisis played havoc with the demands of a new generation and its pursuit of self realization. The elders reacted to the general malaise by retreating to known and worn strategies of survival, to old political reflexes, to the narrow defense of their interests. They could afford to wait and see, or believed they could afford it. But what rational strategies, which reflexes could the middle-class youth fall back on? Only a leap forward into the void became available to many of them. Repeated frustrations bred in them con-

tempt for what society had to offer. In that situation they began blending the ingredients of a radical utopia. Whence the mythological treatment to which they subjected Peronist ideology at the very moment when the established political groups —more traditional Peronists included— sought a form of conciliation. No such fall-back on pragmatic accommodation was acceptable to the young. Cut from the past, greatly detached from both acquired interests and established values, the new generation refused all and every one of the existing political proposals. To those plans the Peronist youth opposed their own radical design —one that scarcely took into account the actual composition of political forces. They formulated their Great Refusal in a language that sought to recreate and echo the tone of earlier, allegedly heroic, epochs of Peronism. They exorcised the ghost of Evita as a champion of the uprooted and the excluded, and evoked anew the figure of her old noble *descamisado*. The middle-class youth's retreat to a mythical past served as a symbolic barricade against the prevailing climate of compromise in other sectors of society. Distant evocations sought to preserve conflict in the face of a present that marched, haphazardly but visibly, towards the resolution of former discrepancies. The radical theme thus became the "revolution betrayed." While Peronists saw the possibility of obtaining historic reparation, the Peronist youth perceived in that a loss of nerve that had to be ruthlessly combatted. Whilst the organized working class was being accepted again as part of the political system and found a place in it after eighteen years of proscription, the young preached revolution in the name of the outcasts. To conciliation they opposed rupture; to accommodation, a struggle without concessions; to the disorderly and pragmatic, even messy, present, a purified and redeeming past. Such language ultimately exploded the rationality of political discourse, fixed its fragments in mythical essences, and redistributed the pieces in unbridgeable dichotomies until violence became the predominant communication strategy. The middle class youth thus built an armed utopia with which it burst into the political arena, stunning the once-confident society that had nurtured it.

Argentine society found itself without any political answer to meet the challenge. Puzzled, unable to respond, politicians and intellectuals took a step back to watch in despair the invasion of the main stage by those whose only way to face the insurgent youth was retribution, whose only language was counter-violence. Fascism now showed its horrible countenance and finally stole the show. Living through this drama has been additional hardship for an already exhausted country. This may explain why those who visit Argentina today, searching for the visible signs of agony, or for the ferment of resistance, are often struck instead by a widespread wish to forget, by a passion for ignorance among large sectors of the population. The acquiescence — and sometimes harrowing support for what goes on— among so many, is, in my view, deeply tied to an immediate past that is perceived as wounding, chaotic, and unredeemed.

II

Governance

"El solo hecho de que los enemigos del peronismo sean quienes son nos parece un motivo mas que legítimo para defenderlo y valerse de él y un día, sabes, un día salir de él y tanta otra cosa por el único camino posible."

Libro de Manuel, 262

With the return of the military to the barracks after the formidable victory of the electoral front led by Perón in 1973, Argentina felt it had re-encountered at last its true political destiny. The wide consensus that developed called for leaving behind past apprehension and recent animosities. It crystallized in a formula for political coexistence that seemed to fit the image enjoyed by the country among its Latin American neighbors—that of a nation socially democratic and politically articulate. On the one hand, Peronists and *Radicales*, the two great national parties, fraternized in parliament; on the other, unions and entrepreneurs rallied around a concerted incomes policy.

Backed by the indisputable electoral majority and holding the banner of coexistence, the old leader reentered the country. Thus culminated a tortuous struggle he had been waging since 1955 against those who now had to step aside and leave him the path open to power. But if this Perón whom Argentines received after a long absence seemed capable of synthesizing his shifts in strategy and seemed able to redefine, from his new position in power, policies which he had advocated from the opposition, could the same flexibility be expected from his own movement? That movement had grown, over the course of eighteen years, as a contesting force that was hardly committed to a political order which had persistently curtailed its participation. How then impress the necessity of political coincidence upon those in whom repeated proscriptions had instilled an acute consciousness of difference? How to persuade those who had seen the relentless diminution of their share in income distribution that it was prudent to make the demands of labor compatible with the general stability of the economy? Finally, how to obtain peace from those whose violence had been previously exalted? The vast popular movement which Perón's return convoked could barely hide a temptation for intransigence, the thrust of accumulated dissatisfactions, behind its proclaimed loyalty to the leader. In fact, the old *caudillo's* calls for conciliation found a more favorable reception among his adversaries than among his

followers. The former saw Perón's message as a promise of political order, while the latter preferred instead to listen to their own claims for political reparation. The political enterprise inaugurated in 1973 thus encountered its first obstacle in the breach between the spirit of conviviality animating Perón's return and the mood behind the popular mobilization that carried him back to the government. In order to bridge this gap, Perón would invest all the reserves of his charisma, which the distance of exile had preserved intact from the deterioration that by 1973 compromised the prospects of institutions. This reference to the state of the political system also throws light on another obstacle confronting the political design with which the old leader came back to the political scene.

The decision to open up the political game, taken by the military in 1972 after arduous negotiations with Perón, who was then in Madrid, sought to forswear the menace that emerging forces and conflicts in civil society might largely overflow the traditional brim of politics. The wave of regional rebellions following the *Cordobazo* of 1969, the outbreak of multiple wild-cat strikes in factories, the spread of urban and rural guerrillas were developments that favored, within the armed forces, the ascendancy of officers like Lanusse, who counseled the need for an urgent political way out. Thus, political institutions were suddenly convened to discipline the social struggle. But they had to be taken out of the closets where they had been kept in disrepair. The summons found those institutions with their structures in disarray, questionable and unrepresentative. The political parties and the trade unions that the Lanusse administration first rehabilitated, and that Perón subsequently invested with new prestige under his proposal for an 'integrated democracy,' had not withstood undamaged the onslaught of interdictions and punishments to which they had been subjected under the authoritarian rule of General Onganía, from 1966 to 1970. Now that they left their forced passivity behind in order to sit at the table of negotiations, could they hope to retrieve the amount of social power that, since the *Cordobazo*, had been accumulating on their side and which remained in the periphery of institutions as a political residue intractable to compromise? Such was the ominous question hanging over political institutionism, cautioning the prospects of the political project that sought precisely to grow and consolidate itself around them.

Thus, for such enterprise to succeed Perón had, on the one hand, to channel the diffuse and virulent expectations of his followers, and on the other, to rebuild the battered political system. A curious paradox of history : he who once had been identified with one half of the country now came to be everything for everybody. The same man who had applied his remarkable skills to sabotage many a government was now called to the rescue of a drifting polity. At stake in 1973 was the very governability of the country. To such endeavor Perón devoted his remaining energies in his remaining days. The

scene of Perón's last battle —to me, symbolic of Argentine politics as a whole — would not be filled with the familiar cast of characters of yesteryear. He did not find himself leading a popular movement against established society. After the collapse of the *Gran Acuerdo Nacional* launched by General Lanusse, and with the Peronist triumph at the polls, the military and economic elites were in full political retreat. Thus, instead of confronting a strong social opposition, the old populist leader faced the harder task of taming the furies loosened by eighteen years of discord.

Bearing in mind this last image, Perón's return to the presidency and the retreat of his opponents have been interpreted as parts of a strategy, as cunning maneuvers on the part of the military, who would presumably wait on the wings for Perón's efforts to fail in order to end, once and for all, his political ascendancy and to stage their own comeback to power. This conspiratorial hypothesis was no more than a rationalization introduced after the resounding defeat of 1973. In spite of its seeming confirmation by later events, it remains an argument of the type *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. In actual fact, in 1973 everybody placed their bets: the military regime sought to negotiate its own succession, and Perón offered himself as an alternative. Profiting from the lack of political credibility of the armed forces, after almost six years of an erratic exercise of power, and displaying his own political talent, Perón won the match, isolating his rivals and forcing them to grant elections unburdened by onerous conditions. Besides, an additional argument against the conspiratorial hypothesis is that the transfer of power to Perón created a situation so unforeseeable that it is hard to imagine a strategy that could count upon such risks. One may know how to start a war, but not how to end it. It was precisely with this uncertainty about the future that the military handed power over to the man whom they had fought for so long, and they left the scene.

The weakness of the outgoing regime was not supplanted by the strength of the incoming government. The skills applied by Perón to disband his adversaries proved themselves insufficient to build a viable political alternative. The populist leader could not dissociate himself from the network on social and political arrangements that he had promoted. Everything rested on his shoulders to the point where he became, old and ailing, a system of politics by himself. Every group came to define its own position in terms of its relative access to the presumed will of the leader, and to couch its designs in terms of his political discourse. When a political system that transcribes autonomous social relations is substituted by a personalized system of politics, when society is expropriated, as it were, by politics, and politics is embodied in one man, then social actors enter a symbolic universe characterized by the absolute primacy of interpretation. This situation gave rise to the bizarre atmosphere of "political hermeneutics" that enveloped Argentina during much of this period. Every act of the leader carried a fateful

meaning; every one of his utterances had to be deciphered. Driven to interpret, struggling over the words of the Argentine *imam*, every group in post-1973 Argentina strove to relate its actions to the expression of the subtle, shifting will of Perón. The compulsion to make their positions appear as manifestations of Perón's own was so deeply engrained that when he sought to repudiate the most extreme interpretations of his statements —notably those of the radicalized youth— the latter countered with the argument that the aging leader was surrounded and misled by a gang of evil advisers.

As Perón's politics became all inclusive, as it incorporated antagonistic forces within itself, social conflict got entangled in struggles over the appropriation of his discourse. Side by side with traditional social oppositions, other ones developed which complicated and confused the terms. The fight against Perón's entourage was put on the same level as opposition to big business; the war against the dissident youth was carried out with the same zeal as the demobilization of the masses. Political life thus came to be like a vast, increasingly tense, *ballo in maschera* in which the masks, though hiding deep antagonisms, oddly resembled one another, for they were all patterned after the effigy of Perón. Political transvestism became the norm. Propelled by the state of mobilization which embraced the entire country, fueled by the old and the new taste for violence cultivated within the Peronist movement, the social conflicts and the political struggles largely exceeded Perón's capacity to steer and contain them. They seized his language and stretched it to unimaginable extremes of disparate interpretations; they put his leadership to a severe test by blocking his decisions, and all was done in his name, with his words. On June 12th 1974, one month before his death, Perón went to the scene of his past triumphs for the last time, to the balcony of the *Casa Rosada*, and threatened to resign, in an effort to regain political initiative over a society that has slipped away from his command.

With Perón's death, Argentina accelerated its pace towards political devastation. The countdown had begun, and nothing would stop deterioration. Perón had been unable to instill political institutions with a life of their own. Instead, he held the country together by virtue of his charisma. But charisma cannot be transferred. Missing a core, even a fictive point of reference, the precarious institutional arrangements collapsed like a house of cards. Brutally decentered, Argentina became like Lichtemberg's knife, which was missing the blade and lacked a handle. Between the missing blade and the absent handle, Argentines could only face the void. Whereas Perón had tried to be alert and responsive to pressures from below, those who inherited his administration busied themselves with secret conspiracies and florentine intrigues, and indulged in unspeakable practices and unnatural political acts. Isabel's close circle became remote from a political society that had lost all regulation, and which was abandoning itself to an orgy of anomie. The entrepreneurs' search for profit degenerated into an economy of sacking

and plunder, the trade unions responded by pushing for enormous demands, the arcane manipulations of the presidential clique gave a tone of unreality to political life. While existing social compacts and political understandings were blown up to bits, people themselves begun to be blown up too with depressing regularity. But despite the expansion of violence, conflict did not issue in an open civil war. The efforts of the contending groups to involve large sectors of the population in their crusades did not have the expected success. Against a background of sordid struggles between armed camps, the established social groups preferred to continue their own bickering, trying to save their respective skins in the face of impending disaster. The eleventh-hour attempts to find a way out failed because of the Peronists' sectarianism and because of the Radicales' civil retreat. In the end, and with the painful sight of wasted hope before them, there was nothing left to the majority of Argentines but to await the return of the military.

III

Patterns of Change

"Claro que mi país es un puro refrito, hay que decirlo con todo cariño." *Rayuela*, 115

Argentina lurches forward, then stops; it jerks ahead; it makes convulsive advances in time. Each movement forward is pulled back toward the starting point. The history of that country has been patterned by the perpetual recurrence of movements of restoration, and by inconclusive revolutions of all sorts. Such ups and downs are the counterpart of a society in which change did not take place through the progressive incorporation of new actors and practices within an ongoing socio-economic order. As in many other Latin American societies, here too the process of change entailed both the maintenance of old sectors and the creation of new ones. With the end of the prosperous society based on agrarian exports, a new industrial structure grew, and when it faltered in turn, modern enclaves of growth developed around multinational investments. As with the accretion of strata in the history of a geological formation, none of these societal forms managed to displace the others entirely. The old and the new remained juxtaposed in odd coexistence. Neither this pattern of change by accretion nor the resulting fragmented, disarticulated society are unique features of Argentina. It is a pattern constitutive of dependent social structures. The peculiarity of Argentina lies rather in the fact that each of the successive societal forms was able to give rise to a dense network of interests and to a deeply entrenched mode of life

that vigorously persist beyond their apogee. During the prosperity enjoyed by Argentina under the agrarian order, a dynamic urban society flourished that housed the most "advanced" middle sectors in Latin America at the time. Literacy then attained levels hitherto unknown in the sub-continent, while secular ways of association went hand in hand with liberal ideas, shaping city and nation until World War II. The industrial development that started in the thirties opened the path for a new social actor — a powerful labor movement, the strength of which derived from the absence of large labor reserves and from the protection of the State. Unionization was fast and thorough. The irruption of organized labor provoked a dramatic extension of political participation, and from then on, the presence of the working class in politics could never again be dismissed. The productive and technological modernization that took place since the late fifties remained encapsulated in industrial poles and lacked the extensive social impact of the previous societal forms. Nevertheless it contributed to the formation of a managerial elite wedded to foreign capital and of decisive weight on national economic policies. Efficiency and growth became the catchwords of this sector as it, in turn, sought to modulate the destiny of the country.

The history of Argentina has thus resulted in a fragmented mosaic of groups juxtaposed in uneasy, crowded collection. Each sector of society forms a strong cluster of interests and is firmly anchored in a set of institutions. Because each of these sectors is highly mobilized, it can defend its particular interests in an articulate manner against the others. The landed upper class both shaped and occupied a series of public and private strongholds from which it increased its wealth and exercised its influence. The middle classes used the educational institutions to lodge themselves in the professions and in the administration. Workers defended their salaries and their rights with strong unions. Monopoly capital found its own bulwarks, with internal and external linkages. Everybody busily promotes his own projects, peddles his own interest, speaks his own language. But no vision arises that proves large enough to reach out to the others, sedimented enough to seek hegemony. The center remains forever elusive; no one finds a common ground. In this volatile, active, articulate society alliances, like fireworks, are as varied and colorful as they are ephemeral. Political fragility becomes the counterpart of all the hustle and the bustle of an activist society. There are too many landlords for too many workers, too many shopkeepers for too many entrepreneurs — the excess resulting from each and every actor being deeply entrenched and rapidly mobilized. To the observer, this sort of negative pluralism poses a fundamental problem of societal coexistence, a Hobbesian conundrum of order, a tension that seeks but cannot find, an adequate political resolution. Expectations are periodically directed towards the State to bring remedy and repair, to warrant order and to unify a fragmented general will — to forge, in short, a single system from the disparate groups.

Yet, contrary to these expectations, state power does not seem to grow in Argentina at the expense of the competing institutions. Time and again the State does rise above the turmoil and seeks to assume the agency of this erratic historicity. But each time it seems to falter, to rapidly lose force, and then succumb to the tug-of-war between actors that cannot themselves rise to the level of social movements and that remain, strictly speaking, mere pressure groups. Thus no power appears great enough to unify the whole society. Too weak to lead, each group is still strong enough to prevent any other from doing so. Hence, though once intellectually brilliant and culturally creative, more emancipated than many other societies from the trammels of traditional authority, Argentina easily falls prey to political decay. The State tends to rapidly lose whatever autonomy it may have attained vis-à-vis civil society and to become instrumentalized, not by a ruling class —as current opinion would have us believe — but by a larger plurality of narrow groups. Things then return to where they started, namely, to the erratic behavior of a malfunctioning political system.

A political system that malfunctions is one that functions purely as a market. For political institutions to work best, they must neither be the simple translation of social interests nor a totally autonomous sphere. Between these two extremes, a political system is that space where negotiations can take place, where alternance is defined by rules, where change is institutionalized. To be viable such system requires a common framework of discussion — something more than a motley assortment of cogs and pulleys that each group manipulates to its own profit and pleasure, something more than a spoils system. But what the State has been unable to guarantee from above, civil society in Argentina has been incapable of supplying from below. Instead of generally accepted rules (even under conditions of ideological hegemony by one class) we find mere pulsions; in lieu of political transactions we find a crazy quiltwork of deals. A tendency develops to exaggerate the importance of the political game for its own sake, and to minimize the purposes for which the game is ultimately played, to lose sight of larger societal stakes. Whenever the state formulates something resembling a national project, it meets derision. In a situation in which everybody knows all too well what he wants and appears capable of the shrewdest insight into the intricacies of the opponent, the most pathetic of all actors is the one who ventures a general project for the nation. Where there is no largeness of aim, no breadth of political conception, only partial answers to blockage and reciprocal vetoes occupy the center of the stage. Just as each group rushes to defend its particular interests and to prevent competing moves on the part of its adversaries, so each group clads its demands in an autonomous discourse. What results is not a debate, let alone articulate class conflict, but a dissonance of independent notes played either together or in haphazard sequence, as in Fellini's *Prova d'Orchestra*. The landed oligarchy —and to a large extent the middle

classes— speak the language of order; the workers, the language of participation; the industrialists and technocrats, the language of growth and efficiency. The loudness of the parts only increases the cacophony of the whole. The society then does not make sense to itself and cannot interpret its position in the world scene. Viewed from the outside, Argentine society does not seem to find a sure —and certainly not a decent— place within a changing international order. Uncertain about itself, it drifts, it slides, it is pushed further to the margins. From within, it behaves spasmodically and seems to lack focus, not because there is a vacuum of power but because power is everywhere, dispersed in explosive *quanta* throughout the social body.

Argentina puzzles and brings despair to those who expect a country literate, urbanized, well fed, to house a free, self-governing people. It also frustrates those who, *faute de mieux*, seem to detect in a modern "efficient" form of despotism the remedy to disunion and license. Finally, it also frustrates those who would like to see a truly revolutionary alternative emerge, with lines of consciousness and organization clearly drawn. But no democracy ever appears, only disorder; no solid authoritarian state, but mere military regimes haunted by their lack of legitimacy and by their crimes; no revolutionary situation, but terrorism. A society that once was full of promise and is still young in years has entered a fateful spiral of decay that sometimes seizes much older nations. But in the latter, the strength of traditions, the respect for weathered and tested institutions, the commonality of belief, makes decadence supportable, and sometimes even genteel. For Argentina, decadence is hell. Without the appropriate resources to muddle through in an unsteady world, lacking the habits of conviviality on which to fall back and repose, the country declines, frenetically, tormented by the image of a past for whose disappearance no consolation seems possible. This vocation for nostalgia has received a severe blow with Perón's death and the subsequent *débaclé*. The coming years will show if the Argentines are ready to face the challenge of looking towards the future, and not only to the past —mediate or immediate— when dealing with the anxieties of the present. Modern Argentina was actually born in 1880. It looks old today, and it is sinking fast as it has reached the centennial. It remains to be seen whether it will renew itself or stay instead, mesmerized *in articulo mortis*.

IV

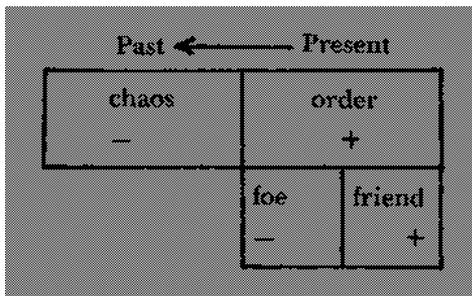
Order

"Well it's blues in my house from the roof to the ground."

Rayuela, 524

Civil society was ill behaved. Now its pathology from below has been sealed by a *coup de grace* from above. After 1976, the principal feature of the authoritarian process that has taken over Argentine life would seem to be the conversion of the previous (and as we have seen chaotic) socio-political discourse into a state-political discourse in which everything is reduced to a simple dichotomy: the paradigm friend/foe. In political theory, the most dramatic formulation of such reduction can be found in an old text from 1927, authored by Carl Schmitt, and which bears the innocuous title *Der Begriff des politischen*. It was not so innocuous. The author later became the self-appointed theoretician of German National Socialism. I mention that text because I find in it the most cogent spelling-out of the somber "logic" of authoritarian situations. For a sociologist, the question that matters pertains to the legitimization of such reduction when it happens, in other words, under what conditions and on the basis of which prior experience does a population, or a sector thereof, "buy" such drastic impoverishment of its civil existence. Political scientists have focused primarily on the resistances to such reduction on the level of the political system and its structural guarantees against such slippage. Sociologists, on the other hand, seek an answer in the institutional arrangements, group processes, and values that allow or impeded, as the case might be, the re-coding of civil relations into a pure state logic, that is, the patterning of all social (intra-societal) relations after the friend/foe (inter-societal) paradigm.

The present regime in Argentina seeks to legitimate itself by embedding its version of the friend/foe paradigm within a larger paradigm of chaos/order, according to this scheme:



The logic is exclusively past-oriented and exclusively negative. It is in fact, a rhetoric of remembrance and avoidance. It consists in telling people that the abuses of present order are preferable to the wounds and chaos of the immediate past. It trades organized repression and administered brutality for past sins and violence. As such, it seeks—and to a surprising degree succeeds—to paralyze the critical will. Its model is simple. It includes three actors as a minimal set: a source of punishment, a victim, and a target. The victim perishes or disappears from circulation, but the target reacts to the news of that destruction with some manner of submission or accommodation, that is, by inhibiting his or her potential resistance. An expanded model includes a division of labor in the source of punishment (a terror staff, internally organized into a directorate of violence and goon squads). The selection of victims can be random or from specific social categories. They are regularly selected, and dispatched with variable rates of destruction. The terror process is continuous or discontinuous, depending on the circumstances, its patterns are of varying intensity, the victims are selected by specialized services, or sometimes by potential victims themselves. In some cases the population is made into an accomplice of the very acts perpetrated against it. There is no surprise in this model; its blueprints have been tried time and again in our glorious century. The striking characteristic of the Argentine version is the duplicity with which it has been handled. The Janus-face of Argentine terror appears on several levels, from governmental disavowal and refusal of accountability, to a split structure of discourse and consciousness among significant sectors of the population.

On the level of official ideology and propaganda, the operating metaphors of law and order are medical, and more precisely surgical. This corresponds to a self-presentation of the regime as punishing definite acts of subversion and breaking up organizations suspected of sedition. Behind this manifest discourse structured around metaphors of illness and cure, there is another text, another discourse, not verbalized by those in power and repressed by different sectors of the population, which corresponds to the terror process itself, and for which medical images are not adequate. The missing metaphor is that of a *chemical* procedure, or more precisely, that of corrosion. As independent social networks dissolve in this "chemical" medium of fear, the first steps towards resistance are inhibited. Only those groups that can insulate themselves in some specific manner maintain a critical capacity (which is a normal capacity of non-terroristic systems). And they will be, most likely, those groups which no longer look upon the immediate past chronicled in this paper as a threat, or merely as a chaos to which everything is preferable. Behind the text of order there is the text of fear, but behind them both there is the solid text of a real class struggle, which will be written, and rewritten, in the end.