

2.3. Old Europe, New America: Domingo F. Sarmiento's Utopia of Well-Being

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Abstract

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento has forever held a revered position as the “father of civilization” in Argentina’s history. This paper offers a revisionist interpretation of Sarmiento’s *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845). After a century and a half, the scholarly interpretation of *Facundo* continues to be hindered by its early-onset canonical status in the history of Argentine political thought. In particular, the convention of reading *Facundo* within a nationalist framework and for its perennial significance therein have closed off an approach to the text as a bundle of speech acts situated in the important context of the European blockade of Buenos Aires during the 1840s. By centring the analysis on this momentary context, and refusing to assume the book’s reception as simply an artefact of nineteenth-century nation-building, this essay reinterprets *Facundo* as a piece of considered, transcontinental imagining, rooted in the imperial dynamics of the post-independence South Atlantic. Sarmiento utilizes the language of utopian desire to describe the best conditions for cities to thrive; the text’s utopian ideas are not aimed at providing an escape from reality but at bridging the forces of civilization and barbarism.

Key words: Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo*, Argentina, Europe, empire

“South America in general, and the Republic of Argentina above all, have lacked a Tocqueville ... to penetrate the interior of our political life” (Sarmiento, 2003: 228). This is how Domingo Faustino Sarmiento cleared a space for his ultimately book-sized intervention in the introduction to his 1845 work, *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (2002). Sarmiento, an exiled Argentine liberal, was openly seeking a canonical status for his work and himself. History promptly obliged. Since shortly after its first publication in Chile, *Facundo* has been regarded as a founder of Argentine literature and political thought. But while canonical status was desired

by Sarmiento, it has burdened historical interpretation of his book. Out of both methodological and normative commitment, as well as simple convention, the prestige attributed and continually reattributed to *Facundo* in Argentina has encouraged it to be read for its perennial significance, while there has been a related hostility to (certain) contextualist approaches.

This paper offers a revisionist interpretation of *Facundo* by focusing on its momentary context and refusing to assume the book's frequent attribution as an artefact of nineteenth-century nation-building. This essay reinterprets *Facundo* as a piece of considered, transcontinental imagining rooted in the imperial dynamics of the post-independence South Atlantic.

"In the Argentine Republic we see at the same time two different societies on the same soil" (Sarmiento, 2003: 73). Sarmiento wrote that the nineteenth and the twelfth centuries live together: one inside the cities, the other in the country. Crucial to what Sarmiento tried to do with the dichotomy between Europe/civilization and Orient/barbarism was how he territorialized the two concepts and, in particular, how he mapped the border between them. In his opening chapter on the "physical aspect" of the Argentine Republic, he asserted,

The city is the centre of Argentine, Spanish, European civilization... There, elegant manners, the conveniences of luxury, European clothing, the tailcoat, and the frock coat have their theatre and their appropriate place ... The capital city of the pastoral provinces sometimes exists by itself, without any smaller cities, and in more than one of them, the uncivilized region reaches right up to its streets. The desert surrounds the cities at a greater or lesser distance, hems them in, oppresses them; savage nature reduces them to limited oases of civilization, buried deep into an uncivilized plain of hundreds of square miles, scarcely interrupted by some little town or other of any consequence. (Sarmiento, 2003: 71)

To a mid-nineteenth century reader such as Sarmiento, there was inscribed in the orientalist discourse a bipartite way of mapping the world — a "conception of the global"; its singular border, imaginary but full of violence, separated the transnational space of Europe/civilization from that of the Orient/barbarism. And in *Facundo*, Sarmiento used this border to splinter Argentina into its urban and rural parts. The former, an archipelago of cities, was the foothold of this supra-European "Europe" in Argentina. This island chain was crowned by Buenos Aires, which, as the country's only port, dominated the post-independence state, thanks to its monopoly on the customs revenue from Atlantic commerce.

Sarmiento placed this metropolis at the height of European Argentina from the outset, forecasting, “Buenos Aires is destined one day to be the most gigantic city of both Americas ... It alone, in the vast expanse of Argentina, is in contact with European nations; it alone exploits the advantages of foreign commerce; it alone has power and income” (Sarmiento, 2003: 72). Sarmiento saw neither Buenos Aires nor the Atlantic coast as the full reach of Europe/civilization in Argentina. In *Facundo*, the foundation of European Argentina was presented as co-extensive with all urban space in the national territory, including cities of the provincial interior like Sarmiento’s native San Juan. This was done through depictions of flourishing civilized life in the interior cities before their decimation by the forces of Juan Facundo Quiroga. In Chapter 11, for example, the city of Mendoza is pictured enjoying industrial progress in its production of silk and mining, before Quiroga took over and supposedly reduced it to barrenness.

Surrounding this urban network of Europe/civilization in Argentina, Sarmiento drew a countryside filled with pervasive, Asiatic barbarism. His description of rural La Rioja province (not coincidentally, the home of Facundo Quiroga) offers a comprehensive example:

I have always had the idea that Palestine is similar in aspect to La Rioja, down to the reddish ochre of the earth, the dryness of some areas, and their cisterns; down to the orange and fig trees and grapevines with exquisite, massive fruit, grown where some muddy, narrow Jordan flows. There is a strange combination of mountains and plains, fertility and aridness, gloomy, bristling mountains, and grey-green hills carpeted with vegetation as colossal as the cedars of Lebanon. (Sarmiento, 2003: 74)

Drenched in analogy to “the Orient” — by this middle point in the book, well-established by Sarmiento as synonymous with barbarism — this is the type of characterization which he tied to rural Argentina, and its medi-terranean pampas in particular. Needless to say, Sarmiento had never been to Palestine or Lebanon, nor would he ever. Moreover, as Sarmiento mapped Argentina’s rural and urban space as Asian and European, so too did he map its inhabitants. While orientalizing Argentina’s rural populations, Sarmiento worked on Europeanizing its city-dwellers.

He described his group of dissident liberals — now-called the “Generation of 1837” — as the highest cadre of European urbanity in Argentina, characterized by “love for European peoples, associated with a love for the civilization, institutions, and letters that Europe had bequeathed to us” (Sarmiento, 2003: 168). Sarmiento often hammered home the reality of this societal schism by presenting the

European civilization of urban Argentines in immediate juxtaposition to the oriental barbarity of their rural compatriots. Dress was a recurrent feature in Sarmiento's illustration of (un)civilized life, evidenced again by this lengthier contrast in the opening chapter,

The man of the city wears European dress, lives a civilized life as we know it everywhere: in the city, there are laws, ideas of progress, means of instruction, some municipal organization, a regular government, etc. Leaving the city district, everything changes in aspect. The man of the country wears other dress ... They are like two distinct societies, two peoples strange to one another. (Sarmiento, 2003: 73-4)

With the excerpts quoted in this section thus far, and countless similar ones deployed throughout *Facundo*, Sarmiento bifurcated contemporary Argentina into a European archipelago of cities and their inhabitants, and a countryside Oriental expanse of Asiatic inhabitants. Nor, unsurprisingly, was this correlation of space to people a coincidence in Sarmiento's scheme. Argentine society was explained in *Facundo* through a severe application of geographical determinism. He attributed the type of people — civilized European or barbaric Oriental — to the type of space. As quoted, the urban space, in its compactness, facilitated "laws, ideas of progress, means of instruction, some municipal organization, a regular government".

He went on, diversifying the argument with commentary on how the expansive pastoral landscape of the pampas prevents governance. "Civilization, then, can never be attained, barbarism is the norm" (Sarmiento, 2003: 244). Sarmiento explained the barbarism of the gauchos by the limits with which the geography of the plains impeded social organization. "He lacks a city, a municipality, intimate association, and therefore 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*" (Sarmiento, 2003: 33).

With a catalogue of utterances in *Facundo*, then, Sarmiento split the nation in two, leaving bastions of Europe/civilization located in and explained by Argentina's cities, and an expanse of the Orient/barbarism in its countryside. Moreover, it is no revelation that Sarmiento qualitatively bifurcated Argentina with the civilization-barbarism divide, but the recognition of this move in terms of transnational communities radically recasts its meaning, rupturing the existing historiography of *Facundo*. Because Sarmiento's conception of civilization was, fundamentally, a global Europe, his cartography of Argentina as split between civilisation and barbarism was not simply a presentation of uneven social progress. Sarmiento was

constructing a global European community (in tandem with its Oriental antagonist), carving up Argentina as he went. What is more, these transnational identities of “European” and “Oriental” into which *Facundo* partitioned Argentina were not meant for a workable accommodation with Argentine nationality which cut across them. Sarmiento narrated these two deep-set identities promising neither coalescence nor coexistence, as one might expect a nation-builder would strive for. Instead, Europe-in-Argentina and the Orient-in-Argentina were staged antagonistically. The hatred of the Oriental gaucho for the European city-dweller, for instance, is a recurrent motif throughout *Facundo*:

The man of the country, far from aspiring to resemble the man of the city, rejects with scorn his luxuries and his polite manners; and the clothing of the city dweller, his tailcoat, his cape, his saddle — no such sign of Europe can appear in the countryside with impunity. All that is civilized in the city is blockaded, banished outside of it, and anyone who would dare show up in a frock coat, for example, and mounted on an English saddle, would draw upon himself the peasants’ jeers and their brutal aggression. (Sarmiento, 2003: 54)

This inter-cultural toxicity in the relation between Europe-in-Argentina and Orient-in-Argentina is writ large into the fissile political history of post-independence which *Facundo* nominally tells. Sarmiento casts the *gaucho caudillos* who rose to power in Argentina from the mid-1820s as the personification of rural and barbaric Argentina, and their urban rivals as the embodiment of Europeaness. “In *Facundo* Quiroga, I do not see simply a caudillo”, he wrote, “but rather a manifestation of Argentine life as it has been made by colonisation and the peculiarities of the land” (Sarmiento, 2003: 94).

Thus, Sarmiento foretells Juan Manuel de Rosas’s 1828 conquest of Buenos Aires in the following terms: “backwardness and barbarism were going to penetrate the streets of Buenos Aires, become established, and set up camp in the fort” (Sarmiento, 2003: 224). The two transnational communities into which Sarmiento divided Argentine space are the real protagonists of *Facundo*’s volatile political history, and the violence of their relationship was rendered interminable. Far from imagining an integrated or integrable national community, then, Sarmiento’s magnum opus of “nation-building” partitioned Argentina between two bitter, transnational opponents. Sarmiento utilizes the language of utopian desire to describe the best conditions for cities to thrive; the text’s utopian ideas are not aimed at providing an escape from reality but at bridging its opposing forces.

This paper has had two main aspects: de-canonizing and recategorizing. In the first instance, I have tried to interpret *Facundo* in an acutely historical way, despite its canonical reputation. As such, I have disavowed concern with the perennial, and even the thematic, to engage with *Facundo* as something momentary and ephemeral. From this perspective, the text appears to have been comprehensively (not exhaustively) shaped by the intention to promote the escalation of Anglo-French military pressure on Rosas's government to a fuller-scale intervention. Such a gritty imperative is concealed from or by the will to read *Facundo* as having perennial meaning. Its implications for networks of imperial "collaboration" pose a special threat to the status of a national classic.

But this is not to say that this sense of threat is justified in truth. I have little personal concern with the aesthetic or normative status of *Facundo*. I have now re-read the book too many times to be able to fully enjoy it and, more seriously, such unconcern is needed to attempt a properly anti-canonical reading. However, for the many who are so concerned, this does not mean that identifying the situated meaning of *Facundo* lowers it as an intellectual object. Enabled and impelled by this de-canonizing approach to *Facundo* is my re-categorization of the text from an artefact of national imagination to one of transnational imagination. Once appreciated as an intervention meant to promote European material support for his anti-Rosista coalition from outside Argentine national space, it more easily becomes apparent that the construction of a transnational community, grouping civilized Argentine with French and British people as European, was Sarmiento's chosen means for doing so. Moreover, at several, important moments of the text, the transnational community was proposed at the expense of the coherence of any national, Argentine one.

Sarmiento's *Facundo*, then, might also be placed in the archive of the history of transnational ideas of Europe. And this suggests the pressing need to better globalize the historiography of that idea. Although its origins are partly located in the critical thought of post-colonialism, the intellectual history of Europe continues to be circumscribed by a distinct parochialism. In particular, it regularly fails to account for the non-European history of the concept. Whereas there has long existed in Latin America a useful recognition of thinkers from beyond its continental limits taking part in the imagination of its regions, there has been no equivalent reckoning by Europeans with non-European thinkers such as Sarmiento who have imagined Europe. This is why the route by which *Facundo* could have entered the intellectual history of transnational thought earlier — the history of Europe as an imagined place and community — has been closed to it. Eurocentric routines of study in the field have for too long insisted that Europe, alone among the regions of the world, has only been invented from within.

Related to this new image of Sarmiento as (re)constructing Europe from its margins while French and British gunboats blockaded Buenos Aires is a closing suggestion for the historiography of trans-, non-, and anti-national imaginaries. Namely, whereas the clash between imperial power and the formally postcolonial states of Latin America has typically been regarded as — and was — a crucible for the development of their nationalisms (the propaganda of the blockaded Rosas government being an excellent example), it could at the same time stimulate the imagination of certain, non-national communities among those, like Sarmiento, who sought to form coalitions with imperial power for their own, local priorities. With the Manichean nineteenth-century discourse of civilization/barbarism as an archetype, the modern ideologies of imperial powers historically involved in this sort of intervention have frequently had a transnational and/or universalist dimension. To a degree, this feature is almost structural for empires, given their need to legitimate rule over acknowledged plurality. So, anchoring many languages of empire has been some sort of a legitimized and legitimizing, transnational space: ‘Europe’, ‘the West’, ‘Greater Britain’, etc. In trying to secure the active support of such empires from outside their formal frontiers, then, the move by actors like Sarmiento to reimagine these places to include more people and space has often made obvious, strategic, as well as affective, sense. Perhaps, then, the historiography of such imperial languages stands to gain from studying how they have been used and reinvented from without the formal borders of their associated empires by those, like Sarmiento, who have seen imperial designs on their countries as more opportunity than danger.

Works Cited

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