

The anticapitalism of Argentina's nationalist intellectuals

by Ricardo López Göttig

DOCUMENTOS

The Argentine Nationalist authors had a decisive influence on groups that were more inclined to accept their authoritarian proposal, particularly in the Army and the Catholic Church and among university students. Perón and his movement were not innovators of new ideas, but rather popularized and massively spread Nationalist ideas in Argentina, from which political slogans such as third position, social justice and economic independence originated.

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Studies of the Argentine Nationalist's history have paid scant attention to this movement's ideas regarding the economy. Instead they have concentrated on the Nationalists' aspirations to install an autocratic and hierarchical form of government, with either military or clerical predominance. On their part, the Marxist theoreticians, starting in the 1920s and with the endorsement of the *Komintern*, presented Fascism as the final stage of the bourgeois capitalism where the reactionary groups manipulated the masses to ensure that capital generated maximum profit¹. Very much to the contrary, the Nationalist intellectuals of the beginning of the XXth century embraced the concept of the state's supremacy in running the economy as one of their main banners, not only to supposedly avoid "dependence" on foreign capital, but also to eliminate corruption, materialism, profit and luxury motives that characterized capitalism and liberal democracy. In order to obtain this, the Nationalists proposed an active participation of the State in the economy² so as to: 1. limit the accumulation of personal wealth, 2. make the capitalists subject to state-designed projects, 3. have the state manage all resources in the event of war. The corporative state was to give preferential attention to "social justice" since capitalism, considered as the prelude to atheistic communism, exacerbated class struggles, further damaging the social harmony that ended with the Industrial Revolution. Manuel Gálvez, Carlos Ibarguren and the priest Julio Meinvielle, for example, all sympathizers of the corporative model, followed this line of thinking.

Manuel Gálvez

The first named was an influential novelist who was a Nobel Prize nominee in Literature in the 1930s. Already in his novel, *El diario de Gabriel Quiroga*, published in 1910, he started with his nationalist preaching against the liberal and cosmopolitan spirit that prevailed in Buenos Aires City and which he labeled as corrupt, vulgar and materialistic:

"And so, what does Buenos Aires have to show? Above all, the presence of repugnant materialism. A fetishistic veneration of money that replaces the cult of moral and intellectual values and a total absence of poetry reveals its tumultuous life style"³.

"Using an anthropomorphic image, Buenos Aires is like a beautiful prostitute who is learning how to look more alluring but underneath the splendor of her cosmopolitan flesh and the mimesis of her complicated and spectacular luxury, at each moment the crude manners of her profession are revealed"⁴.

Gálvez, using a fictitious character, extols the Spanish language and Roman Catholicism as "the essential grounds on which nationality rests", so that all differences were considered extraneous elements that denationalized the

Argentines⁵. The reactionary forces that could fight these dangers would be found in the provinces of the interior of the country:

"The national soul that takes refuge in the provinces desperately fights off Buenos Aires' cosmopolitanism. The provinces, with their traditions, veneration of their country, hate towards foreigners, feeling of nationalism and American spirit, embody in their provincialism (meaning provincial localism), the best possible opposition to the denationalization. This means that we must promote provincialism. This may result in an inestimable asset: the salvation of our nationality"⁶.

To obtain "spiritual greatness" and fight "denationalization", Gálvez did not hesitate in suggesting the use of internal violence, expelling the Protestant preachers despite the freedom of religion contained in the Constitution⁷, as well as in terms of foreign relations, favoring the declaration of war on Brazil⁸ and promoting Argentine imperialism⁹. Gálvez's contemporary, Ricardo Rojas, maintained that the presence of immigrants and foreign capitalists were a "dissoluting" factor for the Argentine society. He urgently recommended that a nationalist slant be given to teaching of history and humanities¹⁰. As opposed to the pseudo aristocratic nationalists such as Julio and Rodolfo Irazusta, Juan Carulla and Ernesto Palacio who were inspired by reading Charles Maurras and in 1927 started publishing the weekly *La Nueva República*, Gálvez supported President Hipólito Yrigoyen's policy of "distributive justice". In 1939, Gálvez published President Yrigoyen's (the Radical Party leader) biography. He considered Yrigoyen as the "father of the poor" and supported his "pro-worker" policy:

"There is hope of liberation for the worker. The native workers are Radicals, they voted for Yrigoyen. (...) They recognize him as having a great heart, a friend of the poor, a man who has a sense of justice. (...) They know that Hipólito Yrigoyen will not place the power of the State at the service of capitalism"¹¹.

According to Gálvez, Yrigoyen ended the policy of the so called "*Régimen*" of the Conservative governments, adopting a clearly anti-British capitalist stance and favoring the Argentine worker:

"The companies are foreign and their Board of Directors, which responds to the demands of the British capitalists, bears no sympathy towards the Argentine worker. Who can they appeal to? Before Yrigoyen, the companies would not listen to any request for improved working conditions, and the governments, made up of professionals in the pay of foreign capital,

supported the companies. The desperate workers have no alternative but to strike. If during the Radical President's term the companies yield, it is because they feel the weight of Yrigoyen's strong arm".¹²

In Manuel Gálvez' own particular vision, Hipólito Yrigoyen's mission is that of a Christian Socialist, with spiritual values that Marxism lacks:

"Yrigoyen loves the people. His social work is deeply affected by sentimental reasons. Inequality among men makes this Krausist and Christian suffer. But he hates Socialism. He abhors its materialistic sense to life, its animosity to spiritual values. Yrigoyen's tenderness cannot abide the scientific aridness of Marx's doctrine. He considers Marx's patriotism as foreign, different to our people's ways. In Yrigoyen there is a sentimental, patriotic, Christian and paternal Socialism".¹³

Carlos Ibaguren

The encroachment of the State on the civilian society did not start during Yrigoyen's first term of office but during previous Conservative governments. Carlos Ibaguren was a civil servant in the last Conservative administrations prior to the enactment of the Saenz Peña Law that made voting obligatory and secret. As Roque Sáenz Peña's Justice Minister, in 1914 he introduced a state-run and obligatory social security system, displacing the voluntary associations of mutual assistance that had flourished without any supporting legal framework¹⁴. As one of the leaders of the recently formed Democratic Progressive Party, a broad-based conservative coalition formed to oppose the Radical Civic Union's growing popularity, Ibaguren drew up the government's program. The following are the most important points:

"In opposition to individual egoism that has dominated and dominates our society and has so many flaws, particularly regarding social economy, we promote mutualism helped by the State for prevision and assistance to the proletariat and cooperation in the production, promotion, distribution and consumption of wealth"

(...) "I pointed out the urgent need to increase our production capacity and to free ourselves economically from foreigners. To this end we recommend that we adopt a policy that intensively promotes our industry, the exploitation, manufacturing and use of our country's products to replace those that are imported. So as to obtain our economic independence, we must create a national

merchant navy and organize our exports under State protection and control".

"To bring about this transformation, which will provide economic independence, I proposed the following solutions: "Organize the most convenient defense and production of our oil, implement a banking system that promotes our production by providing credit to create jobs and a system that controls and regulates currency exchange and monetary circulation"¹⁵.

This was a clear renouncement of the liberal principles contained in the historical Constitution drawn up in 1853/60. As presidential candidate for the PDP six years later, Ibaguren once again makes an appeal for "social justice"¹⁶. During the de facto regime that followed the 1930 coup d'état, he was named Governor of Córdoba Province and he drew up provisional President José Felix Uriburu's (his cousin) plan to reform the Constitution so as to install a corporative regime to replace the representative form of government:

"Society has evolved significantly from democratic individualism that relied on universal suffrage to a collective structure that responds to more complex general interests that are organized coherently within a social framework"¹⁷.

While Ibaguren was becoming the ideologist in the implementation of the corporative regime, as Governor of Córdoba Province he took an active part in regulating the economic activity, creating a provincial Executive Economic Council to establish rent and freight rates and set prices for bread, milk, beef and sugar¹⁸. Ibaguren targeted capitalism as the enemy that needed to be defeated:

"In a liberal State, the capitalist's interests are mainly international and are nearly always opposed to the national interest and generally triumph over it. (...) From a social perspective, those political interests and powerful corporations of cosmopolitan capitalism prevail over the State and exacerbate the class struggle fanned by the demo-liberal system"¹⁹

In 1934 Ibaguren published a book praising Fascism as the solution in face of the supposedly agonizing individualistic liberal democracy. The supremacy was in a group effort and therefore, the individual must submit to the high political interests of the State. Both Marxism and Fascism were the options to definitely eradicate the individualistic capitalism:

"A no-holds-barred struggle has started between two large movements who now occupy center stage in the world's political scenario: the materialistic International Communism and the nationalist and spiritual Corporativism". These two powerful movements

wage a fierce war on liberal democracy so as to eliminate it. This is the irrefutable evidence of our present-day reality”²⁰.

The main difference between Soviet Communism and Italian Fascism was the alleged spiritual and religious content that Fascism preached. It also allowed private enterprise to play a very limited role as long as this coincided with the State-established objectives. Otherwise, both movements did away with man’s fundamental rights:

“Both movements seek a fundamental change in the institutions, both transform the State endowing it with strong powers, both are against individualists, and in both cases the social interests prevail and rule over individual interests”²¹.

Capital and labor cooperated in maintaining discipline and production, ensuring a balance between owners and workers who are represented by their legally-recognized professional corporations²². The State only intervened in the economy if private initiative was absent, insufficient or if the “high political interests of the State are at risk”²³.

The supremacy of the nation, embodied in the State, must overcome individual interests and establish the objectives towards which all efforts are focused:

“The Fascist State is a body that is different to the citizens who compose it. It has a life and superior objectives to which individuals are subordinate to. The Fascist State establishes society’s legal organization with maximum power and cohesion. It is not dispensable like the Liberal State. Instead, it has a function to perform and a mission to accomplish in all spheres of collective life”²⁴.

“(…) in the nationalist conception, the individual is always within the State, he is an atom in the great homogeneous organization that composes the Nation and the individual must be supportive of it. In no case can he be opposed to it”²⁵.

Ibarguren was not alone in General Uriburu’s provisional government with his nationalist, statist and anti-capitalist views. Another mentor of the 1930 coup d’etat was the writer Leopoldo Lugones, who back in 1923 presented a plan of action containing a chapter referring to the national economy:

“A budget based on income tax, a special surcharge on multi-tenant buildings and large estates. A sliding scale tax on bank deposits that are nothing but accumulations of money. Start implementing measures conducive to gold conversion. Regulate the banking system. Impose a State monopoly on mortgages (all land that is mortgaged by foreign companies must be immediately redeemed). Organize industrial

credit. Actively promote mining and metallurgy so that the country, as soon as possible, owns its mineral fuel (coal, ‘*rafaelita*’, oil) and its ore (mainly iron, copper, tin and lead)”²⁶.

Gálvez, promoter of a Fascist dictatorship.

In 1934, Manuel Gálvez also wrote a series of articles in a Buenos Aires newspaper that were later compiled in his book titled *This Country needs...*. It was considered the nationalist doctrine for all those who wanted to definitely abolish the Liberal constitutional order. He detested the private companies’ autonomy even more than Ibarguren did and proposed a policy to fight capital:

“The State must be the only truly wealthy entity to exist in the country. We have to put an end to large land holding, tax inheritance heavily, regulate the excessive profits of national and foreign capital”²⁷.

“The government can pass laws or decrees that foster austerity or reduce sensual habits. Are not the young people’s camps that have been created in Germany magnificent, where they lead a most austere and rigorous life?”²⁸.

Manuel Gonzalez points out the similarity between nationalism (or Italian Fascism that he so admired and proposed emulating) and Socialism’s economic program:

“If politically I consider myself a reactionary, because I am against the Demo-Liberal regime and the worn out lies of universal suffrage and parliamentarism, the same does not occur with social matters. The Socialist Party’s basic economic-social program is timid compared to what these words contain. For the State to be the only wealthy entity, the existing large fortunes have to be done away with”²⁹.

“Fascism as practiced in Italy is only a rightist doctrine that opposes democracy and socialism, but in social and economic matters it is a leftist doctrine as it works for the good of the people and manages the State socialism. Fascism is rightist regarding religion and sets the hierarchy but it is leftist as it reduces capitalism’s power”³⁰.

Manuel Gálvez agreed with Carlos Ibarguren in that the difference between Socialism (Moscow) and Fascism (Rome) is to be found in religion, in the call to spiritual life that supposedly characterizes the second movement.

“(…) we need to practice Socialism but within a framework of order, respecting the family, religion and historical, social and cultural traditions. We need to practice Socialism but without deifying man. To the contrary, we need to place him in the universal hierarchy”³¹.

Given the inevitable disappearance of the liberties that Gálvez proposed, the individual remained subject to the State machinery:

“Our life has to be less centered on ourselves and more on the country’s collective life. Every man must act, without forsaking his personality, as a cog in the immense State machinery. A piston plays the same crucial role as a small screw. Let the person who has aptitude to lead and achieve, be the boss. The rest will happily play their part, as soldiers in a regiment on the march”.³²

Only a providential leader who is not a member of one of the traditional families belonging to the Argentine patriciate (in 1945 Gálvez found such a person in Juan Domingo Perón³³), could resist the corruption that money generates to carry out the great task of social justice:

“If you want to carry out social justice (it is not worth repeating that it must really be wanted), it is necessary to place the solution in the hands of a person who will carry out the task regardless, who can resist the pressure of the wealthy, and who does not have any type of personal interest”³⁴.

Julio Meinvielle

The priest Julio Meinvielle, an influential proponent of nationalism and a teacher of the Catholic Culture courses in the 1930s, also points at capitalism and democracy as being the two scourges of modern society. Capitalism, born from the sin of greed, is intrinsically satanical³⁵. The Middle Ages had managed to produce a miraculous balancing act unique in the history of humanity: social harmony where each man occupied his role in the hierarchic order, each one fulfilling his role in peace and brotherhood³⁶. This order was broken by Luther’s “anti-traditional” reform:

“(…) I call “modern world” the one that has been brought about by the anti-traditional action of the Protestant Reform that was perpetuated by the XX century Liberalism and destined to be buried now by the Bolshevik anarchy”³⁷.

According to Meinvielle, private enterprise’s mission should be to provide work for the most needy and then to obtain a profit that will allow it to survive³⁸. To that end he proposed that the State act as a distributor of wealth:

“On the same doctrine rests the right of the State to limit and regulate private property so that it fulfills its common purpose. Because if the object of private property is to ensure the common use of property, the State, whose mission is to promote the common good, must regulate it for this purpose”³⁹.

Those who govern must not hesitate in expropriating property from those who do not fulfill this objective of favoring the “common good”:

“Government’s measures will not consist of depriving those who benefit excessively from their properties and wealth but rather oblige them to extend these benefits to the largest number of needy families, either by providing jobs, or handing these benefits to the State so that it distributes them among the needy of the community. If, because of egoism or lack of social sensibility, the holders of these productive riches refuse to comply with these regulations, the government should not hesitate in punishing these violators of the social order, and no punishment is as effective as depriving them of their wealth”⁴⁰.

Mimicking the numerous conspiracy theories in vogue in those years including the proven to be false *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*⁴¹, Meinvielle maintained that the economy was at the service of international financiers and he advocated a strong government:

“(…) let us say that to impose order in the property and land production issue requires a strong government, a government free of political constraints and liberal prejudices that is capable of liberating the country from the ring of steel with which the financiers and international speculators have effectively entrapped them”⁴².

As also maintained by Ibarguren and Gálvez, the model to be copied was Benito Mussolini’s Fascist regime. Nazism was rejected because of its pagan character:

“It must be recognized that Fascism, both because of its ways and its means, is, up till now, the only movement that concretely restores the political economy’s traditional principles. The violence employed is justified when one’s eyes are opened by the reality of the moment, a moment of violence. In this respect, the reality superposes the theories and desires. If violence does not impose order, then violence will impose disorder”⁴³.

Conclusions

The Argentine Nationalist authors had a decisive influence on groups that were more inclined to accept their authoritarian proposal, particularly in the Army and the Catholic Church and among university students. Their preaching, which during some periods was accompanied by marches of paramilitary groups emulating the Fascist legions, was successful in staging the 1943 coup d’etat that brought in a military dictatorship with catholic nationalist leanings in which Colonel Juan Domingo played a important

role and later became the main usufructuary. The three authors mentioned here contributed to actively fertilizing the cultural humus that later sprouted into Perónist authoritarianism, anti-capitalist statism and the supremacy of a providential leader who violated the Liberal and Republican principles contained in the 1853/1860

Constitution and later replaced it by the “Justicialista” Constitution of 1949⁴⁴. Perón and his movement were not innovators of new ideas, but rather popularized and massively spread Nationalist ideas in Argentina, from which political slogans such as third position, social justice and economic independence originated.

Notes:

- ¹ KERSHAW, Ian *La dictadura nazi. Problemas y perspectivas de interpretación* (*The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*). Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2004; p. 48. PAYNE, Stanley G. *El fascismo* (*Fascism*). Madrid, Alianza, 2001; p. 190
- ² PAYNE, Op. Cit. He points out the following regarding the Fascist belief: “What all Fascist movements had in common was a new objective for the structure and functional relationship of the economic and social systems, doing away with the autonomy (or in some proposals, the existence) of large capitalists, changing the character of the social condition and creating a new relationship of communal and reciprocal production”. p. 16.
- ³ GÁLVEZ, Manuel, *El diario de Gabriel Quiroga* (*The Diary of Gabriel Quiroga*). Buenos Aires, Taurus, 2001. pp. 92-93.
- ⁴ Idem, p. 93.
- ⁵ Idem, p. 95.
- ⁶ Idem, p. 141.
- ⁷ Idem, p. 96. Places particular emphasis on the Salvation Army.
- ⁸ Idem, p. 101.
- ⁹ Idem, p. 104.
- ¹⁰ ROJAS, Ricardo, *La restauración nacionalista* (*The Nationalist Restoration*). Buenos Aires, Peña Lillo, 1971. PP. 83-84.
- ¹¹ GÁLVEZ, Manuel, *Vida de Hipólito Yrigoyen. El hombre del misterio* (*Hipólito Yrigoyen's Life. The Mystery Man*). Buenos Aires, El Elefante Blanco, 1999; p. 376.
- ¹² Idem, p. 378.
- ¹³ Idem, pp. 384-385.
- ¹⁴ IBARGUREN, Carlos, *La historia que he vivido* (*The History I have lived through*). Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1999; pp. 268-269.
- ¹⁵ Idem, p. 324.
- ¹⁶ Idem, p. 367.
- ¹⁷ Idem, pp. 427-428.
- ¹⁸ Idem, pp. 445-446.
- ¹⁹ Idem, p. 493.
- ²⁰ IBARGUREN, Carlos, *The restlessness of these times*. Buenos Aires, La Facultad, 1934. P. 60.
- ²¹ Idem, p. 61.
- ²² Idem, p. 117.
- ²³ Idem, p. 67.
- ²⁴ Idem, pp. 111-112.
- ²⁵ Idem, p. 142.
- ²⁶ HALPERÍN DONGHI, Tulio, *Vida y muerte de la República verdadera (1910-1930)* (*Life and Death of the True Republic*). Buenos Aires, Ariel, 2000. Volume IV of Biblioteca del Pensamiento Argentino; pp. 592-593.
- ²⁷ GÁLVEZ, Manuel, *Este pueblo necesita...* (*This Country needs...*). Buenos Aires, García Santos, 1934. p. 44.
- ²⁸ Idem, p. 36.
- ²⁹ Idem, p. 51.
- ³⁰ Idem, p. 119.
- ³¹ Idem, p. 103.
- ³² Idem, p. 81.
- ³³ ROCK, David, *La Argentina autoritaria* (*Authoritarian Argentina*). Buenos Aires, Ariel, 1993. p. 156.
- ³⁴ GÁLVEZ, *Este pueblo necesita...* (*This country needs...*), p. 102.
- ³⁵ MEINVIELLE, Julio, *Concepción católica de la economía* (*Catholic Conception of the Economy*). Buenos Aires, Cursos de Cultura Católica, 1936; p. 39. Many years later, Julio Meinvielle tempered his position regarding private enterprise's role, as can be seen in his book “*Conceptos fundamentales de la economía*” (*Fundamental Concepts of the Economy*), Buenos Aires, EUDEBA, 1973. I am grateful to Dr. Gabriel Zanotti for this valuable reference.
- ³⁶ Idem, pp. 17-18.
- ³⁷ Idem, p. 13.
- ³⁸ Idem, pp. 85-86.

³⁹ Idem, p. 58.

⁴⁰ Idem, p. 69.

⁴¹ Regarding the Protocols, see COHN, Norman, *El mito de la conspiración judía mundial (The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy)*. Madrid, Alianza.

⁴² MEINVIELLE, Julio, op. cit., p. 73.

⁴³ Idem, p. 253.

⁴⁴ Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, one of the strongest proponents of Argentine nationalism, recognized that: “Perón displaced us as political managers, but at the same time inherited the ideological capital that we had developed: he became the usufructuary of the Nationalist message“. SÁNCHEZ SORONDO, Marcelo, *Memorias (Memories)*. Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2001; p. 89. Also Carlos Ibarguren recognized that his ideals were incorporated in the 1949 Constitution, except for the implementation of the corporative system instead of a representative government. IBARGUREN, Carlos, *La historia... (The history...)*, op. cit., p. 496.

The Center for the Opening and Development of Latin America (CADAL), with headquarters in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and a representation in Montevideo, Uruguay, was created as a Foundation on February 26, 2003 with the aim of strengthening democracy, rule of law and economic liberties in the countries of the region. With this purpose, CADAL organizes activities related to analysis, research, dissemination and training in the following areas: Latin American Politics; Human Rights; Journalism and Democracy; Economics and Rule of Law; Modernization of Political Parties; and Development and Institutional Communications. CADAL is member of Red Interamericana para la Democracia (Inter-American Network for Democracy) and Network of Democracy Research Institutes. For its work, CADAL has received two international awards: “2005 Templeton Freedom Award Grant for Institute Excellence” and “2005 Francisco De Vitoria Prize for Ethics and Values”.

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