# Failure, democratization, neoliberalism: the rise of *Argentinian declinism* and the making of contemporary Argentina (1983-2001)

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# ABSTRACT

In this thesis, we will study how *Argentinian declinism,* a type of pessimist discourse about Argentinian history and the national identity of its people, has been used by different sociopolitical actors to understand and influence the trajectory of *democratization* and *neoliberalism* in the 1983-2001 period**.** We will posit that discourse on Argentinian decline has been used as (a) a highly popular way to make the country's historical trajectory legible and (b) as a rhetorical device deployed by the main political coalitions during our period of study (Alfonsinism, Menemism). Last but not least, we will suggest in which ways the tropes that inform Argentinian declinism can have a pernicious influence on the social sciences. Our eclectic methodology combines insights from intellectual history, discourse analysis, anthropology, public history, Argentinian historiography, and nationalism studies. The primary sources we will work with are historical texts, editorials, op-eds, movies, documentaries, presidential speeches, video essays, memoirs, and parliamentary debates.

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# INTRODUCTION

History, we often hear, is an important part of Argentinian identity. Many things attest to this, as we shall see: the way Argentinians speak about themselves, the style of the politicians they favor, the movies they film and watch, the books they write and read, and the journalism they produce and consume. Their comparatively strong democratic transition, starting back in the 1980s, was guided by a memory politics and a transitional justice process that were at the centre of the debate happening in the public sphere (Acuña and Smulovitz 1996; Franco 2015). Furthermore, history is usually in the spotlight when discussion of economic policies takes place, something all too common in a country that cyclically faces economic crises (regarding this pendular discussion of historical and economic models, see Arza and Brau 2021). So, to sum it up, this peculiar *historical culture* of the Argentinians (see Sánchez Marcos 2009), ingrained in their national identity, gives them a lens through which they can attempt to comprehend events and processes happening on the national scale and beyond.

The tone these discussions have can often get somber, as Argentinians usually complain about the alleged backwardness of their own culture, the manifest destiny of grandeur that their country did not fulfill, and the exceptional nature of their failure in the world-historical stage. They also confront each other over the meaning and value of a series of contested memories of their shared past, memories that they relate in different ways to their perceived decline as a culture. We shall name this set of rhetorical tropes and memories, this very particular discursive grammar, as *Argentinian declinism,* and we will devote our first chapter to explaining it. Briefly put, it is a public historical discourse that assumes as factual (a) that Argentina has declined from a more glorious past (b) that this fall is exceptional and mystifying, constituting itself as a historical *explanandum* (c) that nonetheless there are precise reasons to this downfall that can be tracked (d) that these causes are associated with either (1) a transhistorical national psychology not suitable for development or

(2) the negative outcome of cultural and historical processes that now live on as traumatic, contested memories.

Two major historical processes that Argentina has faced in the last few decades[1], neoliberalization and democratization, have been partly discussed and understood in the Argentinian public sphere through the lenses of *Argentinian declinism*. While Argentinians tried to capture and guide both of those macro-social processes with their declinist account of history, there is one relevant difference between them: while they are both *emic* (Harris 1976), native categories of Argentinian public debate, they are not equally regarded as desirable. While consensus over the need for democratization at the political-institutional level has been almost unanimous, there has been disagreement regarding the desirability of pro-market policies, with the term "neoliberalism" mostly being used pejoratively in the public sphere. In any case, while these native categories of public debate won't be overlooked here, as they are precisely what we are set to study, our understanding of what neoliberalism and democratization actually entail deviates from them.

Taking an *etic* point of view (Harris 1976), that is, the point of view of the social scientist, we shall define democratization in the Argentinian context as a process that has entailed electoral recurrence (Schedler 1998), a commitment to human rights protection (Bonner 2005) and, as we shall show in the thesis, a discontinuous political ambition to achieve a more substantial form of democracy that would promote distributive justice. Periodizing Argentinian democratization is non-trivial, as elections have been an intermittent feature of Argentinian politics since the early nineteenth-century dawn of its republic (see Ternavasio 2002). How and why 1983 became the contemporary canonical starting point for Argentinian democracy will be discussed in the second chapter of the thesis.



[1] The thesis covers the 1983-2019 period. A shift to pro-market policies after decades of import substitution can be seen since the 1976 dictatorship (see Adamovsky, 2020; Llach and Gerchunoff, 2018; Rapoport, 2020).

Also from an *etic* standpoint, neoliberalism will be understood here as a global era of capitalist development born out of the crisis of post-war "Keynesian" capitalism (see Hobsbawm 2020; Harvey 2005; Ban 2016). Socioeconomically, this era has been characterized by increasing levels of inequality, as well as the deindustrialization of some regions (e.g. Latin America) in favor of others (e.g. East Asia). Policy-wise, it has entailed cuts in social spending, "disciplined" fiscal and monetary policies, the undermining of trade tariffs and economic protectionism, privatization, and deregulation. Intellectually, it has meant the delegitimization of heterodox economics and the popularity of traditions such as monetarism or the "Austrian" school. On a geopolitical level, it has implied the encasement of both national self-determination and democracy by a global institutional framework set to protect capital from forms of national sovereignty (Slobodian, 2018).[2] Culturally, it has caused a crisis of traditional, future-oriented left-wing imagination and utopian thinking, both for the revolutionary and for the reformist traditions (see Srnicek and Williams, 2015; Fisher, 2022).

We shall characterize the whole 1983-2001 period for Argentina as a *neoliberal* era, signed by phenomena such as debt crises, a monetary policy heavily influenced by the International Monetary Fund's guidelines (IMF from now on), deindustrialization, privatization of public goods, rising inequality and unemployment and so forth. This deviates from the *emic* understanding of neoliberalism in Argentina, where it is mostly a pejorative category used by the Peronist left-wing to characterize a shorter, discontinuous span of time (the years in which right-wing governments have ruled, especially the presidency of the also Peronist Carlos Menem in the 1990s). So for instance, in her memoir *Sinceramente*, published in 2019 amidst an electoral campaign she would end

[2] We are aware that this definition dodges the question of *what* historical actors have pushed for neoliberalism. For instance, neoliberalism has been treated as a "political project" aimed to first and foremost "restore the power of economic elites" and, to an extent, "re-establish(ing) the conditions for capital accumulation" (Harvey, 2005, p. 19). We do not deem it necessary to take a strong stance here, as we are not set to explain the origins of either global or Argentinian neoliberalism. If anything, we aim to show the sheer diversity of social actors that have either appropriated or rejected neoliberal talking points and the contradictory fashion in which this all came to be. Methodologically, it seems sound to have a distrust of both conspiratorial explanations that overlook what Merton (1936) has called *the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action*, and of functionalist explanations (see Elster, 1982) that attribute sentience and will to non-human actors such as "the logic of capital". A properly nuanced explanation of the origins of neoliberalism should take into consideration the myriad of social forces interacting in uneven ways to bring about this world we now live in.

up winning, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2019) remembers the re-nationalization of Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF), an energy company, as the most important policy of her second tenure (p. 226), one that would have definitely closed the (neoliberal) chapter of the 90s (p. 304). Similarly, when she is explaining why she did not end up partaking in the ritual transfer of power to her successor Mauricio Macri, she argues that the symbolism of that transition ritual would have been the passing of power from "quien se asumía como representante y significante de lo nacional, popular y democrático" (the representative of what is national, popular and democratic) towards "quien había llegado en nombre del proyecto neoliberal y empresarial de la Argentina" (that who has arrived representing the neoliberal and pro-business Argentinian project) (p. 24). These binaries are mirrored by her opponents, which emphasize the illiberal and anti-free market qualities of recent Argentinian history, immersing them as part of the sub-trope "70 years of decadence" that we shall cover later on. Academic (and thus *etic*) periodizations can also emphasize a discontinuous timeline here, as e.g. Adamovksy (2020) does when he speaks of "three neoliberal cycles" (1976-1983, 1989-2001, 2015-2019), characterized as periods in which poverty, inequality, capital flight, foreign debt (and the payment of its interest rates) all went up dramatically. Even so, periodizations that emphasize the existence of a continuous neoliberal *era* highlight the impossibility of rebuilding a mass industrial Fordist society of strong trade unions and full employment (see Srnicek and Williams, 2015; Fisher, 2022; Gerchunoff and Hora, 2021), the kind of society which originally spawned Peronism, due to several factors such as the threat of capital flight being now always in the background. This is well-suited to explain some transfigurations of Peronism, such as its 1990s "territorialization" (Svampa, 2005; Adamovsky, 2020) that implied the loss of relevance of the factory and the trade union against other social spaces (like the *barrio*), practices (like patronage) and identities (like the *piquetero*, who is unemployed), increasing the social and political importance of welfare[3]. This phenomenon was not reversed after the 1990s and is still

[3] This does not imply neither that welfare was not relevant during original Peronism (as the story of the Eva Perón Foundation goes to show), nor that the organized workers' movement has had no relevance in the contemporary

an ongoing feature of Argentinian society, which goes to show the merits of a continuous periodization.

## Structure

In the first chapter, we will define *Argentinian declinism,* starting with a historiographical overview of the origin and uses of six tropes that are vital to understanding it: the *Latin mentality*, *civilization-barbarism, the dual country, Argentinian exceptionalism,* the *Argentinian manifest destiny,* and the *Argentinian failure.* Argentinian declinism's plasticity lets it exist across the ideological divides and political coalitions of its country's public sphere, but it does take different forms according to the sociopolitical actor that is navigating its grammar. These different forms revolve around different normative evaluations of what we will call the contested memories of the Argentine past (we will focus on the Colonial era, the May Revolution, the *Rosismo*, the *República Conservadora*, the *Década infame,* Peronism, the 1976-1983 dictatorship, and the 1983-2001 period). We will not offer an exhaustive review of how these processes were and are memorialized: we will study them insofar as they were framed, by opposing sociopolitical actors, as either virtuous or vicious, linking them in a global diagnosis and explanation of failure that suggests a course of action. This will be done in the *longue durée* of Argentinian history: events from as early as the colonial era and as late as 2022 will be covered. To sum up, chapter one will provide an elucidation of the heuristic qualities of this theoretical concept we propose, *Argentinian declinism,* to shed light on several (a) recurring interpretations of memories and (b) rhetorical tropes.

In the second chapter, we will cover the uses of Argentinian declinism during the early democratic era (1983-2001). This will imply an assessment of the historical discourse laid out by both Alfonsinism and Menemism: their evaluation of the Argentinian past and the future they both envisioned, and how historical development shook these notions. The historical cinema of the

decades (as the continued importance of the Confederación General del Trabajo's political realignments exhibits). It has worked as a shift in relative relevance instead.

1980s will be our case study to address the shape and fate of the historical imagination that was being constructed during the period of the chapter.

Finally, we will conclude by summarizing our findings and suggest in which ways this research could inform historiographical research and studies on the genealogy and uses of decline discourses.

## Methodology and literature review

Thematically, this work spans across several fields of research and different types of sources. Said scope demands methodological eclecticism. In the present section, we will outline our methodology by detailing which theoretical frames of reference and which historical sources we will work with. Several academic fields inform this thesis in the questions it poses, the literature it draws from, and the methodology it uses. Argentinian historiography, public history, nationalism studies, discourse analysis, anthropology, and intellectual history are all relevant to our endeavor. In a broader sense, academic research that has tackled the question of how decline discourses develop and are weaponized will also be of help.

Modern Argentinian historiography (from 1983 onwards, after the so-called "professionalization" of the field, see Di Meglio 2011) lays the groundwork of secondary bibliography that supports our general overview of the 1983-2001 period[4]. However, this historiography has sparsely tackled the more specific subjects of either "decline" or its political uses. As Andrés Kozel (2007, 2008) observes, even when it has done so, it has usually been in a marginal fashion, and not as a proper research topic. Omar Acha (2005) has noted that, in fact, the opposite seems to be true: as can be seen in its seminal works of synthesis, like Luis Alberto Romero's *Breve Historia Contemporánea de la Argentina* or the *Nueva historia argentina* edited by Juan Suriano, the post-1983 Argentinian professional historiography has directed its efforts towards reconstructing national history as the

[4] A recently published and up-to-date manual is Adamovsky (2020). For the economic history of Argentina's recent past, see both Llach and Gerchunoff, 2018 and Rapoport, 2020.

story of a *normal country* ("país normal") heading towards progress understood in a liberal-democratic sense, a conception that, for Acha, opposes the widely more generalized view of Argentina as a *malformed country* ("país deforme") of institutional vices. To this diagnosis of an Argentinian historiography concerned with reconstructing the story of a *normal country* and, thus, disconnected from narratives about the *malformed country*, we shall add two exceptions: firstly, economic history (of the kind that is mostly produced in Economics departments) has spawned a genre of texts concerned with explaining the origins of the Argentinian decline, therefore taking it for granted (e.g. Glaeser, Di Tella and Llach 2018; Schvarzer 1993). Secondly, the rise of an amateur popular history in the XXI century provoked a reaction from university historians, at first materialized in op-eds in the press and in research articles, and later on, in the surge of a generation of academic public historians that have been progressively engaging with Argentinian society: publishing books for a broader audience, screenwriting historical documentaries or historical cartoons for children, acting as curators or directors in museums, podcasting, and so forth. These attempts spawned a literature that, by analyzing amateur popular history, has forcibly engaged with this myth of the *malformed country*, with the questions of decline and failure, and the role they play in Argentinian society (see Di Meglio, 2011). These issues have also been connected with both international and local insights into the field of public history, regarding how such popular histories are able to be meaningful for wider segments of society (Selbin 2012; Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998). Lately, a branch of discourse analysis that does center on the question of decline has been deployed to study the political and historical rhetoric of the recent ruling parties in Argentina (for the 2003-2015 period, see Perochena 2022a; for the 2015-2019 years, see Wasserman 2022). Last but not least, the doctoral thesis of the aforementioned Kozel (2008) tackles, with the toolkit of the historian of ideas, the history of the idea of the Argentinian failure through the trajectory of five intellectuals (Lucas Ayarragaray, Leopoldo Lugones, Benjamín Villafañe, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Julio Irazusta) for the 1900-1955 period.

Dealing with both political discourse and key political concepts such as nation or democracy requires an engagement with intellectual history. Spawned from a theoretical revolution that shook the history of ideas field (see Skinner 1969), and enriched by contributions of many sub-traditions like the German *Begriffsgeschichte* or the English Cambridge School, intellectual history has been particularly relevant for the Latin American and Argentinian case, especially renovating the study of its nineteenth-century political history (see Guerra 1992; Palti 2007). Some of their insights that will matter here are (a) the centering of the pragmatic and illocutionary dimension of language (see Skinner, 1969) is precisely what lets us shift from the study of "decline", or the "idea of decline", to the study of its uses; (b) the broad and eclectic nature of the sources deemed here as relevant (see below) has been inspired by Pierre Rosanvallon (2002)'s approach; (c) the focus on political concepts' *futurity* and on how their diachronic, multiply-stratified layers of meaning let several senses co-exist and interact within the same concept (Koselleck 2004).

From nationalism studies we shall draw, first and foremost, the insight that nations and national identities are socially constructed (Anderson 2006; Gellner 2008; Smith 2013)[5], as well as the instrumental nature that its myths can take (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). We argue that people can experience many different types of relationships with their nationalities, and some of them have been more overlooked than others. Indeed, John Breuilly (2006) once stated that overt forms of patriotism, associated with the "willingness to die" for one own's nation, are rare and have been exaggerated in *nationalism studies:* exceptional circumstances can radicalize national sentiment, which is nonetheless usually fed with more mundane manifestations, such as flag-waving (see Billig 2005). Rational choice theorists have given instrumentalist explanations of national identities, in which the material incentives that come with citizenship take a fundamental role in explaining individual national loyalties (O'Leary 2018), and Tara Zahra (2010) has proposed the study of *national*

[5] Regarding the shared social-constructivist frame of nonetheless opposing stances about the origins of nation and nationalism such as the ones quoted here (especially Smith, who contends that nations are not necessarily modern creations), see Özkirimli (2000). If nations are a modern construct or not does not concern us here, as Argentina's creation and its identity are uncontroversially nineteenth-century, modern phenomena.

*indifference*, a form of apathy toward nationalism that flourished precisely at the latter's heyday. Likewise, we posit that Argentinian declinism entails a type of relationship of a people with its national identity that has often been ignored (although, as we shall see below, there are precedents to its study).

General anthropological notions, such as the emic-etic one introduced before, will be of help. Discursive strategies used to frame the "other" are very relevant to understanding how a national community can otherify itself, as Sarmiento's civilization-barbarism paradigm (studied in chapter 1) will go to show: the barbarism lies within.

There is also a branch of international research literature that specifically deals with comparable uses of decline discourses abroad. By doing so, it takes a distance from the genre of texts concerned with explaining "civilizational" or "national" decline as an actual occurring phenomenon (for a classic example of the genre see Gibbon, 2015; for a contemporary rendition of the genre, see Beckeld 2022). The insight here is not that "decline" is false (although it is a forcibly normative term, it can be operationalized as a concept if one equates it to a variable or an index), but that political discourse that thematizes decline has enunciators, intentionalities, and effects associated with it that are worth studying. Thus, a researcher that is upfront about treating the long-term decrease in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country as that country's "decline" may be operationalizing the concept in a way that is relevant for researchers, and this is in principle compatible with other studies that analyze how such findings could be used by e.g. the media to convey a broader and more axiological, negative message about a country or the identity of its inhabitants (for an article that does just this for the Argentinian case, see Daniel Scheingart 2017). Of course, the academic article itself could be riddled with bad faith intentionality, and, as we shall see later on, the same tropes that inform popular thematizations of the nation can be tracked in several academic fields. In any case, some examples of this international literature that does concern us here, due to the distance it draws from the trope of decline and the insights it provides for

studying its uses, can be found in Claudio Rosso (2021), who studies the Italian case (for both the *Risorgimento* and the fascist era), using prime works of Italian historiography across the centuries (e.g. Cesare Cantu) and school textbooks to address how a declinist discourse focusing on Italy's lost potential took off, a discourse that focuses on post-1492 Italian "decline", its proposed explanations (such as the lack of political centralization) that would end up serving practical goals (like the legitimization of the Italian political unification and the Risorgimento). The same tropes would be resignified later on for fascist purposes during the twentieth century. Similarly, Guy Ortolano (2008), who covers the political and cultural uses of British Decline discourse amidst that country's deindustrialization, uses satirical magazines and an op-ed controversy regarding the origins of the so-called British decline to study the context and effects of this type of debates. Self-otherification, such as the one we will study for the Argentinian case, can be seen in other nations such as Australia (it has been called cultural cringe)[6] or Brazil (where it took the name *complexo de vira*-lata, e.g. de Souza 2013; for its comparison with the Argentinian case, see Palermo 2015). More general frameworks to study the social construction of national stereotyping and self-stereotyping have been advanced, as well, such as imagology (see Beller and Leerssen 2007; Chew 2006). A research project on the role of stereotypes about failure in public debates is underway (see Cordis 2003). Likewise, studies about the political uses and shifts in ontological notions of national character have been done from the perspective of comparative intellectual history (Trencsényi 2012). We have differentiated between studies that assume decline as an actual phenomenon and studies that, instead, take discourses of decline as an object and trace either their genealogy or their uses. In a similar fashion, the works we just mentioned do not assume the ontological validity of national stereotypes and self-stereotypes, wondering about their social construction instead.



[6] The term *cultural cringe*, originally used by the Australian Arthur Phillips (1950), attempts to portray the "inferiority complex" of Australian *national ethos*. Its "convict stain" and its perceived inferiority over European and North American culture in several fields (from science and art to economic development) are here taken into consideration, as Phillips argues that this is a product of Australia's *cultural derivativeness*. Transnational history has been written using *cultural cringe* as a concept, with a recent article using it to compare the historiography of New Zealand, Australia and Canada (Pickles, 2011); and there have even been attempts to build criteria to measure it quantitatively (Feather, 1993).

The primary sources that are going to be used here will be eclectic, such as our theoretical and methodological references. Political speeches, parliamentary debates, movies, documentaries, historical best-sellers, video essays, memoirs, journalistic editorials, and op-eds will all be analyzed. These sources will be considered in two levels of detail. Primary sources pertaining to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's book *Facundo* (chapter 1) and the historical cinema of the 1980s (chapter 2) will be given more complete consideration, whereas other public interventions will be quoted insofar as they advance our argument, without pretending to exhaust their meaning.

## The prevalence of declinism and its relationship with historical optimism

Two clarifications have to be made, regarding Argentinian declinism's social prevalence and its relationship with historical optimism.

One of the most immediately contestable hypotheses that will be advanced here is the ubiquitous character of Argentinian declinism across both society and the political spectrum. Usually, the bibliography that covers the Argentinian case focuses on the anti-peronist tradition and their uses of decline discourses and the trope of national failure (Jauretche 1995; Adamovsky 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Grimson 2019). On a more global scale, it has traditionally been pointed out that decline discourses in general are more akin to the right-wing, even though recently it has been argued that left-wing discourse has become more nostalgic and past-oriented, with the right becoming more future-oriented in its discourse instead (see e.g. Traverso 2018; Fisher 2022; Srnicek and Williams 2015). In this thesis, we hope to show that there is a common declinist grammar across the sociopolitical spectrum. The popularity of so-called revisionist historians[7], which will be covered in our first chapter, exemplifies this widespread character of Argentinian declinism.

[7] To clarify, *Revisionismo histórico* is unrelated to what is usually understood abroad as historical revisionism, that is, genocide denialism (which also exists in Argentina for the death toll of its last military dictatorship, as a specific genre of amateur history unconnected to the revisionist tradition). See Acha, 2012.

As we will see throughout the thesis, there is no radical incompatibility between historical optimism and Argentinian decadentism. In the same way Billig (2005) emphasizes the continuum of social practices of varying intensities that underpin nationalism (from chanting a national anthem to going to war), more pessimist tropes can lose relevance during optimist times, nonetheless thriving as sleeper agents that eventually come out to the surface once again in times of crisis. Historiographical metaphors and concepts often deployed to study Argentina emphasize this cyclic succession of hope and disillusionment, especially to describe the country's economic history: two well-known examples are *El ciclo de la ilusión y el desencanto* (Gerchunoff and Llach 2018) and the *stop-and-go model* (see Ricchione 2022). This is also ever-present in popular culture: for example, the rock band *Bersuit Vergabarat* illustrates this when they sing "Del éxtasis a la agonía oscila nuestro historial" ("our historical record oscillates between ecstasy and agony") in their anti-jingoist but nonetheless nationalist song "La argentinidad al palo". Moreover, there is conceptual solidarity between historical optimism and Argentinian declinism, as we will see in our first chapter. For now, let us say that, as it has been argued (Kozel 2007, 2008), the idea of an Argentinian failure presupposes the belief that the country had a manifest destiny of greatness.

# CHAPTER ONE:
# THE TROPES OF DECLINISM AND THE CONTESTED MEMORIES OF THE ARGENTINE PAST

> We should not be surprised that a country should periodically review…the things which come down from its past and describe them anew in order to find out *what it can make of them.*
>
> Roland Barthes.

In this chapter, we shall provide a more complete definition of Argentinian declinism by studying the genealogy and some uses of (a) six of its constitutive tropes and (b) the contested memories it spins around.

By tropes (which we will also refer to as topics or *topos*), we shall mean rhetorical devices that have become commonplaces of political discussion rooted inside a specific community (Plantin 2018). Rather than being merely ornamental to discourse, they manifest power relations, they have epistemic content (*logos*), their use presents its user to their audience in a particular way (*ethos*), and they attempt to produce an emotional effect (*pathos*) (Chica Vélez 2022). Notions such as trope, topic, *topoi*, prejudice, stereotype, image, or national character are all related and relevant for fields such as nationalism studies and imagology (see Beller and Leerssen 2007). When we say that topics are commonplaces inside a specific community, thus, we are speaking mostly about a *national* community (our case study is Argentina, although this chapter deals with Atlantic History as well). Moreover, we will succinctly argue that some of these tropes are commonplaces of the scientific community, as can be seen in the fields of the sociology of religion, new institutionalist economics, and Latin American history of ideas. Far from being detached from national discourse, these fields inform it, through a complex process of transmission that we cannot cover here.

By *contested memories,* we refer to nodal moments of the Argentinian past that hold a meaning that is incessantly disputed by local sociopolitical actors: the Colonial era, the May Revolution, the *Rosismo*, the *República Conservadora*, the *Década Infame*, Peronism, the 1976-1983 dictatorship, and the 1983-2001 period. They concern us only insofar as they are invoked to understand Argentinian

"decline"[8], and that is why they shall be covered simultaneously with the tropes. In general, collective memories are never unilaterally accepted, which is why the psychological and psychoanalytical metaphors often used in collective memory studies can be as misleading and reifying, relying on an essentialist view of what nations are (see Kansteiner 2002). This agonistic quality does not undermine the fact that some memories are stabler and more accepted as such than others. But as there is not (there cannot be) a consensus view of the past, no golden age will tacitly be accepted by Argentinian society.

## The Latin mentality[9]

Discourse around civilizational decline, as well as nostalgia for an often imagined time of rigid hierarchies and prosperity, have been around since antiquity[10]. One way in which this almost transhistorical phenomenon can be differentiated from a more concrete manifestation such as *Argentinian declinism* is by positing that the latter is partly born from an early modern conceptual split that is still relevant today: the culturalist differentiation of the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin. The way this works in the Argentinian public sphere goes like this: the grievances of the country are treated as an epiphenomenon of a backward *mentalité* ingrained in the Argentinian people, associated with vices such as corruption or laziness provoked by a heritage, either ethnic or racial, that goes back to the Colonial era. Omar Acha (2005) has argued that, by positing this transhistorical Argentinian psychology, twenty-first-century revisionist historians find a common principle that allows them to write a unified *national history*.

Animosity towards the Latin mentality is followed by the praise of the "Anglo-Saxon" or the "Protestant" mentality (both terms are used in an interchangeable fashion). Macrist Congresswoman Sabrina Ajmechet (2021), also a practicing professional historian, has written in

[8] Memory discourse around, for instance, the 1976-1983 dictatorship far exceeds the questions of "decline and failure".
[9] I would like to thank Pedro Cardim for all the bibliographical recommendations and advice on how to conceptualize the early-modern Latin/Anglo-Saxon, Protestant/Catholic split.
[10] For a compendium of historical examples of this phenomenon, see Beckeld (2022). Regarding the limits of the philosophical framework and historiographical rigor of his approach, see Volpintesta (2022).

right-wing journal *Revista Seúl* that Argentina's allegedly backward "state-centric" conception was a product of its "Latin and Catholic" roots, while Congressman Pichetto (2019), Macrist candidate for the vice-presidency in 2019 and the head of the Peronist bloc in the Senate in the 2002-2019 period, famously said in a parliamentary speech that "he is considering converting to Protestantism", as Argentina's problem would be its business-averse mentality filled with "catholic guilt". This doxastic version of the Weberian insight (see below) is relatively generalized. It is not uncommon for Argentinians to claim that they should have been colonized by the British instead of the Spanish (see Grimson 2019), a sub-trope often mirrored by other nations colonized by "Latin" empires. This can be observed in the Brazilian case, where the Dutch colonization of Pernambuco (ultimately cut short by the Portuguese) is highlighted in its alleged modernizing effects and idealized as a counterfactual scenario (see de Mello 2002).

Despisal of Spanish heritage has not been a unilateral feature of the Argentinian national identity. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a reappraisal of this legacy was attempted by the then-at-power national elites, as a part of an Atlantic redefinition of what Hispanicity and Iberoamerica meant after Spain lost its last Iberoamerican colony, Cuba (see Bertoni 2020; Prieto 1989). This reappraisal left a mark in, for instance, the 1900 shortening of the national anthem, in which the most insulting diatribes against the Spanish were removed by presidential decree. Moreover, the country did receive a large influx of Spanish immigrants towards the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth, with around half of Buenos Aires's population being composed of immigrants, most of them Spanish or Italian (Rapoport 2020). The way this immigration was symbolized, however, goes to show the pervasiveness of the "Latin mentality" trope, as the political threat they posed to the regime (some of them being European workers with socialist and anarchist ideas) implied the undermining of their legitimacy by elites that were reading them precisely as foreignizing second-class "Latin" Europeans (see Bertoni 2020; Prieto 1989; Terán 2019).

This trope is not explicitly *national* in its intended frame. For this reason, it lends itself better to be used on a regional and even civilizational scale, and also to penalize Argentina's politicians for their geopolitical stances. In general, "antipopulist" mediatic coverage of the Latin American "pink tide" goes for it to emphasize and explain the region's backwardness. Loris Zanatta (2020a; 2020b), a practicing professional historian with a journalistic career, describes, in his *La Nación* op-eds, how Argentina's failure started with the triumph of "catholic values" over "modern", "Anglo-Saxon" and "protestant" ones, a triumph that Peronism came to represent. He claims that Argentina's decline is a unique case in contemporary history, soon contradicting himself when stating that this is part of a broader phenomenon that explains the persistence of populism in Latin America in general, which is why he published a book named *Fidel Castro: the last Catholic king* (Zanatta 2020c).

Having already defined the trope and provided some examples of its use, we will succinctly focus on its genealogy, as it will serve three valuable objectives: (a) Problematizing available chronologies of what we call Argentinian declinism (see the last paragraph of this chapter) (b) understand the verisimilitude and pervasiveness of this trope in academic settings to achieve a more nuanced portrayal of the previously introduced *emic-etic* distinction (as *emic* tropes very often determine *etic* concepts). Three macrosocial processes will be important here: the interplay between the colonization and decolonization of the Americas, the rifts between opposing colonial empires, and the interaction between the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation.

Briefly put, after an initial Iberian hegemony over the colonization of the Americas, three European contenders appeared: the French, the British, and the Dutch[11]. Both the Spanish and the Portuguese Empires were hostile to these colonization attempts from the start, and a series of skirmishes and battles followed suit, starting with the massacre of the inhabitants of French Florida by the Spaniards (1565) and the destruction of France Antarctique by the Portuguese (1567).

[11] This is a narrative simplification done to not overcrowd the argument. Rather than merely defining the historical actors advancing the colonization in imperial or proto-national terms, one could look at them from a social standpoint or (as it is done later in the paragraph) as actors involved in a religious split.

Interestingly enough, in both cases, the Frenchmen that had established those colonies were Huguenots, some of them fleeing from Catholic persecution. Similarly, the English settlers that established the Plymouth Colony, the mythical ancestor of the United States, were also protestants: more specifically, they were Puritans that stood against both the Catholic Church and the Church of England. When the Dutch, the French, and the British began contesting Iberian hegemony over The Americas, a particular genre of discourse started being deployed by them. Eva Botella Ordinas (2008, 2010, 2013, 2015) has studied the British imperial legitimations of territorial overtaking of territories the Spanish claimed for their own. These legitimations, advanced by actors as diverse as philosophers, pirates, and the Royal Society, some of them grounded in the philosophy of John Locke, portrayed Spanish colonization as vicious and violent, juxtaposing it to a virtuous and just British colonization. These narratives aiming to undermine Spain's moral standing, of rising popularity amidst ongoing conflicts between European powers, have been famously labeled as "Leyenda Negra" (literally, "Black Legend") by early-twentieth-century Hispanophiles (see below). What cannot be overlooked is that cultural self-criticism played a large role here. Even amidst the optimist context of the *Siglo de Oro Español*, the legitimacy of Spanish colonization was being put into question by Spanish figures such as Bartolomé de las Casas and Francisco de Vitoria, generating great internal turmoil (Brading 2017) and providing arguments and sources for the making of the "Leyenda Negra" abroad. Benjamin Schmidt (2001) shows the echos of Las Casas' works as they circulated among the Dutch, eager to undermine their Catholic Habsburg rulers, and eventually, to portray their own (failed) colonization attempt in The Americas as comparatively positive.

Towards the end of the XVI century and the first half of the XVII, amidst the well-known crisis of the XVII, the Iberian empires are faced with the consciousness of their own shortcomings in comparison to their competitors. This is the time of the *arbitristas*, individuals whose written advice to the Spanish and Portuguese monarchs has left us prolific textual evidence of a consciousness of crisis and a reformist spirit amidst the Iberian elites (see Dantas 2018; Almeida Borges 2014). To

an extent, this reformism implied seeking to copy antagonist and partly Protestant Empires, on political or economic grounds. The general context of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, however, overlaps with this process. Therefore, one should not expect to see here a Catholic self-loathing, an explanation of "underdevelopment" in terms of an undesirable religious culture. That is a later development. In any case, we can already see here an interesting dialectics between critique and self-critique.

In the XVIII century, a reformist impulse common to all colonial Empires is underway. It is related to the increased financial pressure of the European wars. Especially so after the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1715), with The Americas becoming another theater of war. The centralizing reforms the British Empire attempts are a failure, leading to the American Revolution instead. Yet, the same reformist impulse ushers the Borbonic and Pombaline reforms, which end up providing the Iberian empires increased financial and territorial control over their American colonies. What concerns us here is that this successful reformist impulse is legitimized, once again, with an Iberian self-critique that is conscious of the superior success of rival empires (Halperin Donghi 1985). Meanwhile, the Enlightened critique of Catholicism and of Spain takes root, reproducing previous anti-Spanish tropes (see Feros 2017), as it can be seen in the *Encyclopédie*, in which it is stated that Civilization owes nothing to the country of Cervantes (Beller and Leerssen 2007).

During the nineteenth century, Spain loses its Iberoamerican colonies in several waves of independence movements, triggering another reformist and self-reflective impulse (see Portillo Valdés 2006). More positive, if not downright condescending, images of Spain start appearing abroad in this century, amidst the intellectual popularity of romanticism: Spaniards are highlighted by their "passionate women, dauntless bandits, and colourful customs" (Beller and Leerssen 2007: 246). If anything, speculative philosophies of history produced during these days (such as Sarmiento's, which we will cover below) are indicative of how little the historical imagination of the time thought of Spain, being instead mesmerized by this association of the Protestant and the

Anglo-Saxon with the cusp of development. England, in particular, became a metonym of the *telos* of historical development, with Karl Marx (1988: 7) warning Germans that, "*De te fabula narratur!",* what has happened in England will happen to them as well. The aforementioned Cuban independence (1898), alongside the Philippine Revolution of the same year, constitutes another milestone in Spanish self-critique, giving rise to the R*egeneracionismo Español*, also known as *Generación del '98*, which concerned itself with explaining and countering Spanish decline, which is thematized in works such as *La España Invertebrada* (Ortega y Gasset 1922). To sum it up, by the 1900s, it was quite established that Spain had been playing catch-up for centuries against other European states, to an extent "Anglo-Saxon" and "Protestant" ones.

It is in this context that we have to speak of the contemporary social sciences. "Latin mentality" trope users from nowadays are more likely to have originally encountered the trope via a vulgarization of, for instance, Max Weber's sociology of religion, such as the one that the aforementioned Ajmechet and Zanatta do, rather than from an early-modern source. In his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (2002) argues that Protestant (especially Calvinist) religious doctrine generated an original set of values in its adherents, which in turn led to the making of a work ethic that promoted the *rational accumulation of wealth* that, for him, is a prerequisite of capitalism. This would have set Protestants apart from other religions that, briefly put, morally discourage rational accumulation. For reasons of space, it is impossible for us to exhaustively consider here the relationship between the social sciences and the reproduction of what we call the *Latin mentality* trope[12]. Nonetheless, we will reconstruct a critique of an unfortunate overlap

[12] A more complete assessment of the subject ought to consider more fully Congost, Gelman and Rui Santos (2016)' theoretical criticism of new institutional economics, which explains Latin American underdevelopment due to the illiberal "institutions" introduced in Spanish Colonization (compared to the liberal "institutions" that would explain the United States' success). Through his historiographical research on Argentina's nineteenth-century economic history, Gelman has gone on to show the failure of the neoinstitutionalist framework in explaining Argentina's economic performance during Rosism, as well as the weak empirical basis of the interpretations (that know both left-wing and right-wing proponents) that explain Argentina's failure due to the "concentration of the land" inherited from Spanish colonization. The enormous social influence of customary practices to determine access to land and labor, even in the presence of formal private property, persisted at least through the May Revolution, the 1820s and Rosism. Rather than slowing down economic growth, this ensured higher levels of social equality. (Gelman 2005a, 2005b, 2010).

between the two: Elías Palti's (2009b) assessment of explanations in terms of political culture in the Latin American History of ideas.

As Palti shows, the traditional Latin American history of ideas field, epitomized in the figure of Leopoldo Zea, legitimized its own relevance by appealing to the implicitly normative idea of studying the originality of "deviations" and "failures": as Latin American thought would not have made original contributions to the "universal" canon, what made it a valid object of research had to reside in the mutations that European "ideas", such as liberalism, faced when relocated to a context foreign to them, such as adopting a more "conservative" overtone. A series of authors Palti deems culturalists (Charles Hale, Louis Hartz, Richard Morse, Claudio Véliz) rose against the geographical framing of this position, arguing instead that (a) liberalism is not foreign to Latin America, being a constitutive part of its political culture instead (b) conservative liberalism is not a Latin American exceptionality either. Indeed, even in Europe, there would be a "Latin" type of liberalism, more centralist and "organicist" rather than individualist, more akin to Rousseau than to Locke, to France and Spain rather than to England and the United States (ultimately, it must be said, a less "liberal" liberalism). The distinction between Anglo-Saxon liberalism and Latin liberalism described here belongs to Charles Hale. In *The Founding of new societies*, Louis Hartz would claim that societies born out of colonization get their political culture out of their colonizer: colonized by Spain, Latin America would have received a medieval and scholastic political culture. Richard Morse keeps this framing but argues that Spain was never properly feudal, so actually the centralist impulses of its culture would have come from the Habsburg era. Charles Hale (aware of François Furet's works and the debates regarding French Revolution revisionism) states instead that the origin of Spanish centralism would reside in the Borbon era of Spain. While he keeps the same "political culture" model of explanation, his decision to postulate the origin of Latin American political culture centuries after its colonization does open up the question of why, between the "Habsburg" and the "Borbonic" traditions, Latin America would have inherited the political culture of the latter and not the former. Claudio Véliz tries to explain this proposing that

external influences cannot fully determine a local culture, and that this pre-existing local culture is what explains the "selection" of one tradition and not the other. But at this point, the whole culturalist model falls apart, as the *explanandum* (Latin American "political culture") becomes the *explanans* (Latin America's pre-existing "authoritarian" local culture that would be responsible for the selection of either the Habsburg or the Borbonic tradition). Furthermore, it does not seem logical to assume that different traditions can exist within the metropolis but not in its "derivative" colony. Last but not least, Bernard Bailyn would show, in *The Peopling of British North America*, the limits of the concept of "political culture" itself, making visible the dubiously liberal ideas of the original British settlers of the nowadays United States. All in all, for Palti, this would all go to show the methodological limits of the original history of ideas vis-a-vis intellectual history. It also contributes to our point regarding the limits of a naive, strict version of the *emic-etic* distinction.

## The Civilization-Barbarism paradigm[13]

The Civilization-Barbarism trope is a native category of Argentinian political debate nowadays, which we will reconstruct starting from Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo*. It does share structural similarities to the *Latin mentality* topic, yet its nuances are worth discussing because of its local relevance, and the uniqueness of its initial Argentinian adoption, indivisible from the *romantic political language* (see Palti 2009a)

The opposition between civilization and barbarism, which highlights the contrast of a self-image of civility and superiority with a negative image of savage alterity (Beller and Leerssen, 2007), was originally coined amidst the Greek (see Pomeroy et al. 1999). For a *longue durée* history of this binary amidst early modern Europe, see Kwiatkowski (2020). More generically, largely comparable forms of ethnocentrism are present among other cultures such as the Aztec (León Portilla, 1992) and the Chinese (Beller and Leerssen, 2007).

[13] I would like to thank Gastón Darío Rodríguez for the enlightening discussions we had regarding the role that Sarmiento plays in Argentinian declinism.

The prevalence of the "civilization-barbarism" dichotomy in Argentinian popular culture has been attributed (see Jauretche, 1995; Adamovsky, 2018a) to the success of Sarmiento (2018)'s *opus magnum*, *Facundo o civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas. Facundo* is a hybrid book (it mixes several genres, such as *costumbrismo* literature, biography, political essay, and romantic sociology) that follows the life of the "barbaric" political leader Facundo Quiroga, regarded by Jorge Luis Borges (1974a) as "the best main character of our literature". The book illustrates the Argentinian exceptionalist trope (see below), the despisal of Spanish heritage built in the *Latin mentality* trope, and the civilization-barbarism paradigm. Armed with its romantic and speculative philosophy of history, *Facundo* pretended to shed light over what was perceived as an "anomaly" that contradicted universal laws of history: the "triumph" of barbarism over civilization in Argentina, a "triumph" represented by Juan Manuel de Rosas 'authoritarian government, that had Sarmiento and the rest of the romantic intellectual generation exiled. As the intellectual historian Elías Palti (2009a) explains in Hegelian fashion, the victory of Rosas[14] was seen as a synthesis of history's dialectic in which, for reasons unexplainable under the romantic political language, barbarism had led the synthesis over civilization instead of the other way around. Sarmiento (2018), in his prologue written from Chile, highlighted how the "discovery" of this historical impossibility was so relevant to universal thinking that he wished to take his book to "France and England, to the Monarchy and to the Republic, to Palmerston and Guizot, to Luis Felipe and Luis Napoleon, to the *Times* and the *Presse*" (p. 46), just for them to see. What is deemed civilized and barbarian in this narrative is usually described in geographical terms, with geographical determinism being key for romanticism (see Goldman and Salvatore, 1998). Civilization is associated with regions in contact with rivers,

[14] Rosas dialectically combined civilization and barbarism, "being a son of the cult Buenos Aires without him himself being cult", a barbarian that has the "intelligence of a Maquiavelo" and "does evil without passion" (Sarmiento 2018: 35). This sets him apart from Facundo Quiroga, the romantic *great man* who passively reflected his barbarian surroundings better than anyone

seas, and cold climates (such as Buenos Aires and Argentinian's *litoral* region), as well as to cities and the urban; on a geopolitical level, it is related to Europe and the United States. Barbarism, on the other hand, is associated with heat, lack of water, and the rural; geopolitically, with Asia and Africa. They are deemed as two forces in conflict, using a very explicit axiology that favors civilization (although the topic of the noble savage is deployed from time to time and, on an aesthetical level, barbarism is way more prominent in the book, a very romantic trait; see Terán, 2019). This centrality of geography and climate draws from a previous intellectual tradition related to the *topos* of national character (see Trencsényi, 2012). An admirer of France and England (and, later in his life, of the United States), Sarmiento viewed Italian and Spanish culture as less desirable: in *Facundo*, for instance, he had stated that Spain was between civilization and barbarism, "near Europe through a broad isthmus, afar from Africa through a narrow strait" (p. 37). To Sarmiento, Merely pretending to import civilization without understanding the local terrain and what it implies is what would have led to the downfall of the unitarist project epitomized by president Bernardino Rivadavia in the 1820s. And Sarmiento and his generation would get the chance to themselves govern. *Facundo* was studied by Argentinian historiography (e.g., see Halperin Donghi 2004) because of how it reflected some of the political ideas and agenda of this liberal elite that, not without internal rifts for political and intellectual reasons, finally seized power after Rosas 'long-awaited fall. In this agenda, the development of "Civilization" was tied, among other things, with European immigration, which did notoriously arrive in the second half of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth, while integration with the world market was hastening dramatically.

To summarize, the *Rosista* government (1829-1852) placed liberal historical imagination (and the romantical political language) in a crisis that could not have been foreseen in the more optimistic days of the Revolution against the Spanish empire. This crisis led to, on the one hand, the condemnation of what was seen as barbarian in the national *ethos* and, on the other hand, the belief that the Argentinian national experience was exceptional and unparalleled in the global context.

This pessimist view among intellectuals was produced by what was perceived as the ordeal of not being able to achieve, after forty years since the revolution, the writing of a national constitution (all attempts at hosting constituent assemblies had violently failed), the establishment of political centralization, the consolidation of national loyalties, and the enactment of economic development: to sum it up, the problem lied in the failure of both nation-building and state-building. Interestingly, Sarmiento added a postface to *Facundo* in 1845, which is named "Presente y porvenir". There, through a variation of the then widespread *cunning of reason* argument[15], he stated that, thanks to his egotistical pursuit of political power and without realizing it, Rosas had fulfilled a historical mission, the political unification of Argentina. The postface was removed in the 1851 edition: this, it has been argued, is an index of the crisis that this type of optimist historical imagination faced in front of the sheer endurance of Rosas 'government (Palti 2009a). The fall of the regime in 1852 did not change this, as it was followed by a decade of civil war, in which Buenos Aires stood alone against the rest of the country. For the 1874 edition, belonging to the last year of Sarmiento's presidency (1868-1874), with the nation's political unity almost settled (see Oszlak, 1982), Sarmiento added the postface one last time.

The romantic political language is no longer. Nowadays, as the revisionist Norberto Galasso (2004) claims, the civilization-barbarism distinction is used in public debate more or less exchangeably with other conceptual oppositions such as "democracy and authoritarianism" or "modernization and underdevelopment"."Republicanism and populism", we might add, is also fundamental for Argentinian public discourse (see Mckinnon and Petrone, 1999). These oppositions, which are grounded in liberal historical imagination, have nuance to them, with "civilization-barbarism"

[15] Sarmiento probably did not read Hegel: by the *cunning of reason* argument, I am merely alluding to the generic argument, also found in other figures of the time like Mandeville, Kant or Adam Smith, in which non-virtuous actions occurring at a micro-level are actually explaining a virtuous outcome happening at a macro-level (e.g. Smith's invisible hand), a functionalist reasoning which plagued the historical imagination of the time (see Elster, 1982). About the relationship between German idealism and Argentina's romanticism, it has to be said that the only other romantic intellectual of comparable relevance to Sarmiento, Alberdi, who was mostly responsible for the writing of Argentina's aforementioned national constitution in 1853, did read and quote Hegel. Sarmiento himself was familiar with Herder's work. For the history of the reception of Hegelian thought in Argentina, see Assalone (2021).

holding a less politological and more racist connotation. An example of this is a 2018 editorial of Argentina's prime newspaper *La Nación,* in which an episode of football hooliganism is covered with the title "Una barbarie que hay que eliminar de cuajo" (a literal translation would be "A barbarism that has to be pulled out by its roots") and labeled as an episode of "barbarism and savagism". This kind of "annihilation fantasy" (see Adamovsky, 2018a) is nowadays rather common in press coverage of this type of events, as well as in anti-peronist rhetoric. In 1861, Sarmiento (educ.ar 2015a) wrote a letter exhorting soon-to-be president Bartolomé Mitre to "no trate de economizar sangre de gaucho. Este es un abono que es preciso hacer útil al país. La sangre es lo único que tienen de seres humanos esos salvajes" (literally translated, "do not economize *gaucho*'s blood. It is a manure that should be put to use in this country. Their blood is the only human-like thing those savages have"). This moralization and ontologization of political conflict, understood as a clash between good and evil in which no act is forbidden, coexists in Sarmiento's legacy with a more dialectical notion in which the interplay of what is simultaneously barbarian and civilized is alluded to (as we have seen for the cases of Rosas and Spain) and even commended: such is the case at the start of the *Facundo,* when endearing figures such as the *gaucho baqueano* are described, and also with Sarmiento's trademark phrase "Las ideas no se degüellan", a costumbrist (instead of literal) translation of the French phrase "On ne tue point les idées". As told by Oscar Terán (2019), standing in front of Facundo's tomb in the Recoleta cemetery, Sarmiento once said "Mi sangre corre ahora confundida con la de Facundo, y no se han repelido sus corpúsculos rojos, porque eran afines" (p. 181) (literally translated, "my blood now runs mixed with Facundo's, our red blood cells not repelled, because they were kindred"). These ambiguities illustrate the ambivalence of what we could now call Argentinian declinism, the coexistence between feelings of superiority and both fear and aestheticization of the barbarism that ultimately lies within[16]. While

[16] Jorge Luis Borges (1974b) would exploit this trope to great literary effect several times in his career as a writer. In his fictional retelling of the *unitario* "doctor" Francisco Laprida's death, while being bethroated by an "intimate" knife wielded by an anonymous member of a barbarian *montonera*, he finds joy and relief knowing he has finally met his "South American fate". Likewise, his fictional character Juan Dahlmann, another intellectual-coded urban and frail

the *Latin mentality* trope implies a self-condemnation of one's entire culture, the Civilization-Barbarism paradigm allows (a) an internal separation between what is good (civilization) and evil (barbarism) (b) a more dialectical understanding of the nation's problems that blurs this distinction (c) the possibility of developing an aestheticization and commendation of what is "Barbarian" as actually more authentic and good (versus what is cosmopolitan and foreignizing), inverting the axiological status of the civilization-barbarism paradigm and, once again, proclaiming an enemy, at the cost of once again clouding the dialectic. This final framing can be seen, for instance, in the *criollismo* of the early twentieth century (see Prieto, 1989; Adamovsky, 2015) and in historical revisionism (see chapter 3). Moreover, as we are about to see, it is the axiological inversion present in the *dual country* topic.

## The dual country

While reappropriations of the civilization-barbarism paradigm that invert its value are still contemporarily relevant, several analogous conceptual binaries that have spawned in the twentieth century also are or were. Some examples are Peronist-Antiperonist; the national and popular against the oligarchic; Cause-the Regime (employed by Yrigoyen supporters in the first decades of the twentieth). It is not possible to focus on all of their nuances here, but covering the "dual country" *topos* will prove useful.

The "dual country" trope of a nation that is torn between a "visible" and an "invisible" country, originally coined amidst the Argentinian nationalists' 1930s reception of Charles Maurras works (see Aboy Carlés, 2001), is fairly common among historical revisionists, as we will see. Moreover, as Aboy Carlés shows, it came to structure an important myth for the Peronist identity: the idea that Peronism came to *represent* a thus far ignored part of the nation, that would now be rendered

figure, finds comfort and happiness in the fantasy of dying not an embarrassing death of sickness and hospitalization, meeting his end instead in a knife fight against a rural *compadrito,* amidst an unfinished escape to *El Sur*.

socially (and electorally) visible, after years of being postponed by a relentless national oligarchy (see also Sigal and Verón, 2003).

In any case, during 1945-1955, Peronist rhetorical exhortations to redeem the "invisible" Argentina co-existed with consensual claims of representing the whole nation (Aboy Carlés, 2001; Sigal and Verón, 2003). In his 1989 inaugural speech, Menem (educ.ar 2015c: 6) proclaimed "The visible country and the real country are over. I come to unify those two Argentinas. I come to fight for the reunion of those two fatherlands" (translation mine). Less successfully, a viral electoral spot (Ela P. 2013) from Margarita Stolbizer and Ricardo Alfonsín (son of the ex-president) asked for the rendezvous of "Argen" and "Tina", a split more usually referred nowadays as "la grieta" ("the fissure"). Besides this consensualist rhetoric, the popularity in social media of another version of the trope returns to the monist fantasy of abolishing "Barbarism" by advocating to split the country altogether, leaving behind an underdeveloped part that would symptomatically be called "Peronia" (see Adamovsky, 2018a).

The dual country is one of the tropes that structure historical revisionism, which we shall define here (see Devoto and Pagano 2009, Halperin Donghi 2005, Acha 2005). Originating in the 1930s, although drawing from previous intellectuals that are usually understood as their "anticipators", the revisionists are an Argentinian historiographical tradition that has had several peaks of popularity. Originally right-wing nationalists denouncing British imperialism and "official history" (an imprecise mix of nineteenth-century Argentinian historiography, school history, and contemporary academic history), they vindicated especially the figure of Juan Manuel de Rosas and denounced liberal national heroes. Struggling to achieve institutional legitimacy, for the most part, they have been an editorial and political phenomenon. As Halperin Donghi (2005) says (see below in "Argentinian failure"), their whole narrative of history is informed by a decadentist perspective in which the foreign and a traitorous national oligarchy defeat a succession of national heroes (at first specially Rosas, but the pantheon was progressively extended). In the same way, there is an

"invisible" Argentina, there is also a pantheon that official history would have hidden, being the revisionists the ones who reveal this charade by a historical argumentation that is usually more essayistic rather than erudite. Later on, revisionism would know left-wing and right-wing variants, with Peronist and non-Peronist versions as well.

## Argentina's *manifest destiny*

*Do not let Argentina become a power. She will drag behind her all Latin America.*

-Winston Churchill, two times Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (the quote is apocryphal)

We define the trope of the Argentinian manifest destiny as the statement that Argentina has (or had) an exceptional destiny of greatness among nations[17]. This has historically been argued for by historical actors appealing to:

(a) The privileged quality of Argentinian weather, soil, geography, and resources (also a trait for other national discourses such as the Mexican, see Fair, 2009; Kozel, 2008).

(b) The exceptional virtue of the Argentinian psychology among other cultures (e.g. Sarmiento compliments their sense of self-worth, arrogance, and superior quality, commending this trait as a positive one not only for the civilized but also for the "barbarian" *gauchos;* 2018: 63), sometimes accompanied by a claim of ethnic or even racial superiority (e.g. the myth of Argentinian Whiteness, see Adamovsky, 2012).

(c) The protagonist geopolitical role Argentina is either going to play or ought to play in the future of Latin America (see Tato 2022).

[17] The name is a reference to a nineteenth-century United States myth, although it is also used, from an *etic* standpoint, in Argentinian historiography. See Tato 2022.

(d) The belief that Argentina had a golden, virtuous era that goes to show the verisimilitude of its manifest destiny. Several golden ages have been proposed, with Rosism and Peronism being the usual focuses of historical revisionism (see Halperin, 2005). Yet, the contemporary belief that Argentina used to be a world superpower (Fair, 2009) during the *República Conservadora* (1880-1916) is nowadays the most usual, as we shall show below (see "Argentinian exceptionalism" and "Argentinian failure").

(e) The providential role of Argentina in both Latin American and World history, as laid out by first and foremost Bartolomé Mitre (nineteenth-century president, prime historian, and founder of *La Nación*), as well as the romantic intellectuals Sarmiento and Alberdi before him, and by members of the *Generación del 80* after him. This strong version of Argentina's manifest destiny Kozel (2008) describes[18] affirms (a) and (b), also finding a positive golden age in the days of the May Revolution, canonically retold by Mitre himself. While the days of Rosas are remembered here in a somber way, his defeat would confirm the nation's bright path. We would like to add to Kozel's conceptualization that (e) constitutes a speculative philosophy of history. It almost fits the three traits of Walsh's (1983) popular definition: (1) it proposes a partly immanent and necessary *telos* (the fulfillment of Argentina's independence, revolution, democracy, freedom, and greatness), (2) it proposes a motor of history (the idealist march of the idea of freedom circumstantially promoted by individual heroes and masses that act on its name) and (3) it claims relevance for the entirety of human history (this is not entirely pertinent, but for Mitre the Argentinian nation does preexist its revolution and independence, being rooted in colonial times). Rosas' defeat acting as proof of Argentina's manifest destiny even mirrors Kant's idea of the French Revolution being a historical sign (see Lendvai, 2005).



[18] He uses for it the name "*ilusión argentina*" *("*Argentinian hope"). Our decision to redefine the concept comes down from the fact that what he deems the complete and mature version of this idea, the one that includes (d), is the less prevalent one, especially so for our period of study (1983-2019). Nowadays, belief in metaphysical philosophies of history has become anachronic.

Insofar as the manifest destiny trope represents, in its strongest version, an optimist and future-oriented philosophy of history, it would be wrong to even label it as a part of "Argentinian declinism". As we have mentioned, though, faith in the nineteenth-century speculative philosophy of history quickly became anachronical. Furthermore, as we shall see down below, weaker versions of the trope (e.g. versions that do not hold progress as the *telos* of national history but do endorse the "natural resources" and the "the *República Conservadora* was a world superpower" claims) are regularly instrumentalized to engage in discourse about decline and failure, which makes its inclusion here advisable. Last but not least, as Kozel (2008) points out, the idea of the Argentinian failure needs some version of the manifest destiny trope to function (see below).

## Argentinian exceptionalism

*There are four kinds of countries in the world: developed countries, developing countries, Japan, and Argentina.*
-Simon Kuznets, Nobel Prize in Economics (the quote is apocryphal)

In a strong version, Argentinian exceptionalism is the claim that Argentina follows a unique trajectory in either Latin American or world history. Exceptionalist statements can be either positive and even jingoistic (see above, Argentina's manifest destiny) or, on the other hand, negative and even self-stigmatizing. A softer version of the trope, though, basically uses it as a hook in communicative settings such as journalism and video essayism (quoted below). In this sense, the apocryphal "Kuznets" quote (see The Economist 2014, The Economist 2019, Yglesias 2012, Manuzzi n.d., is usually used, both by Argentines and international observers, to capture the interest of an audience by positing that the Argentinian failure is a historical anomaly, sometimes considering its "promising" economic performance amidst the *República Conservadora* (examples of the use of the apocryphal quote are The Economist). If those days of agro-export boom, *Beaux-Arts* architecture, political fraud, and social exclusion are usually regarded as the golden age in this

commonplace genre of historical narrative (of both international and local interpreters), what is less clear is, as we shall see below, what contested memory marks the country's downfall from grace.

When a negative trait is proclaimed to be uniquely, exceptionally Argentinian, the subtext is that a specific social issue is not a problem for other countries, part of the self-flagellating *pathos* of perceiving oneself as a barbarian. Local *barrabrava* culture (akin to football hooliganism) is usually understood through these lenses and thus provides a good example. Media coverage of football-related episodes of violence frequently spawns editorials and op-eds in which national failure and allegedly world-exceptional football violence are linked (see Adamovsky 2018b). With titles like the aforementioned "A barbarism that has to be pulled out by its roots" (La Nación, 2018), or exaggerated claims like "Argentinian football is the only one in which away fans are not allowed" (Caparrós 2019, translation mine). The incidents leading up to the final of the Copa Libertadores 2018, which implied the rescheduling of its final match, were reported in the right-leaning *Diario Clarín* with the title "The umpteenth failure of the *barrabrava* country" (Gonzalez 2018, translation mine), and a first paragraph that reads "The problem is not football. The problem is Argentina. The *barrabrava* country that cannot resolve the dilemmas of a teenage age that has lasted for two hundred and two years now".

It is quite common in both public debate and academic research to announce "the end of the Argentinian exception", or even its "Latinoamericanization" (in a more or less pejorative, yet analytical, sense) when it is perceived or measured that the country is underperforming in, usually, social grounds. The economists Llach and Gerchunoff (2018) use it for the Argentinian 1980s due to the decline of its GDP per capita, whereas the sociologist Svampa (2005) calls Menemism the end of the "Argentinian exception", the "exception" lying in being a country with a strong middle class and upwards social mobility. Journalist and head of *Diario Perfil* Fontevecchia (2019) suggests, in turn, that it is twenty-first-century Argentina, characterized by rising poverty and a decline of its

Gini coefficient, the one that suffered "Latinoamericanization". Mauricio Macri campaigned in 2019 on avoiding the menace of "Venezuelaization", a term that has also been deployed for similar purposes in Mexico, Brazil, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Godoy and Román, 2020).

## The *Argentinian failure*

*Argentinian society is the biggest failure of the latest seventy years*
-Mauricio Macri, Argentina's president from 2015 to 2019
(LaPoliticaOnline 2017, translation mine).

By the trope of the Argentinian failure, we mean the claim that Argentina failed to realize its potential. To an extent, then, users of this trope are usually subscribing to a version of the manifest destiny *topos*.

Several competing public explanations of why the failure and decline happened are available. Efforts to stylize their nuances and provide an easy dichotomy (for instance, speaking of "liberal" and "Peronist" explanations) would betray the complexity of the subject. Instead, we will survey them through available public reinterpretations of contested memories, elaborating a sample that takes into consideration video essays, documentaries, political speeches, op-eds[19] and academic articles.

1) The first batch of interpretations explains the "failure" by claiming it is a legacy of the colonial era, which is here the contested memory in question[20]. Colonization would have had a dark

[19] An interesting source here is the collection of op-eds published by *Infobae* that give different answers to the question "¿Cuándo se jodió la Argentina?" (an almost literal translation would be "When did Argentina get ruined?"), a paraphrase of what the main character of Mario Vargas Llosa asks at the start of the novel *Conversación en la Catedral*: "¿Cuándo se jodió el Perú?". The phrase has recently become popular in Argentina. Vargas Llosa himself has given his answer: Peronism (ElCronista 2016).

[20] The meaning of the colonial era is still under contest in Argentinian public debate. However, only fringe sectors reivindicate it. As Halperin Donghi (2005) shows, by idealizing more contemporary golden ages, one can set local revisionism apart from other decadentist traditions such as the Mexican one (this differential outcome is understandable considering the much longer and successful history of the *Virreinato de Nueva España* compared to the *Virreinato del Río de la Plata*).

legacy over local (a) concentration of the land (e.g. BadEmpanada 2021)[21] (b) political culture, institutions, religious culture or national psychology (several academic and non-academic examples of the first three were provided above; regarding national psychology, see the anti-peronist pundit Andahazi (2018) and twenty-first-century historical revisionism (e.g. Lanata 2004). In a sense, this version of the trope alludes to a failure that dispenses with decline, exception, and manifest destiny: Argentina would have been doomed from the start. It still makes sense to present this view here (instead of conceptually separating it as a form of non-declinist pessimist view, for instance) because of the formal affinity this sub-trope has with the others, as well as the fact that they usually go together in public discourse: as we can see in the video essay hoser (2022), it is not at all uncommon for an enunciator to eclectically shift between "contradictory" views of decline, sometimes endorsing simultaneously all of them. The previously mentioned Andahazi (2018), in particular, "contradictorily" combines within the same text a determinist declinism with a voluntarist faith in Macrism to redeem history by mimicking the *República Conservadora*).

2) A second group of views sees the start of the failure in the inability of the May Revolution to become a socioeconomic revolution instead of merely a political one (either because it would have been a "bourgeois revolution" or because the most radical actors it had were marginalized). At some point (Bernardino Rivadavia's presidency, for instance, well known for the ruinous Baring Brothers loan he took), colonial ties would have been replaced by neocolonial ones. There are nationalist, anti-imperialist, and Peronist versions of this rendition. The historical documentary *La hora de los hornos* (1968), very popular during 1970s political radicalization, shares this view. The *leitmotiv* of 1970s historical revisionists that asked for a "second and definitive independence" also has to be read along these lines: as Halperin Donghi (2005) argues, this meant an optimist orientation towards the future that differentiated these

[21] Regarding the "concentration of land" *topos*, or ar least its versions that trace it back to the colonial era, see footnote number twelve.

revisionists from the more widespread decadentist historical revisionism[22]. Lastly, Cristina Kirchner makes this stance regarding the May Revolution and neocolonialism hers (Perochena 2022a).

3) A third cluster of explanations, very similar to the previous one, posits the 1852 defeat of Juan Manuel de Rosas as the negative turning point in which the fate of the country was sealed, with a "proto-industrialist" national federalism falling short against a foreignizing Anglophile unitarian project. This can especially be seen in the original historical revisionism of the 1930s (as well as its so-called "anticipations" from previous decades; see Devoto and Pagano, 2009) and is still present in some authors of the following waves of historical revisionism, like Pacho O'Donnell (2018), who pinpoints the 3rd of February of 1852 as the precise turning point towards decline.

4) A fourth set of claims, which we will identify as the Alfonsinist view, attributes the starting point of decline to the 1930 *coup d'état,* which opened an intermittent cycle of more coups, electoral fraud, and political proscription. The deep causes of this process would lie in the national oligarchy (defined, as usual in local political discourse, in a vague fashion as rural and speculative) and their will to rule the country, which became entirely undemocratic when their own relative decline, associated with the plummeting of the terms of trade for the rural sectors amidst the 1920s. This view that can be seen, for instance, in Alfonsín (1981)'s *La cuestión argentina* and the 1983 historical documentary *La república perdida.* Both will be analyzed in Chapter 2.

5) A fifth class of assertions is that Argentinian decline began amidst Peronism, usually due to either its alleged abandonment of a liberal mode of growth or its popularization of a populist

[22] In this text, written in 1985, Halperin Donghi predicts that historical revisionism would once again take a decadentist form, as it is subject to the demands of a society and political parties that ask for this particular explanation. This prediction was accurate, considering the radicalization of the decadentist traits of historical revisionism during the public history boom (see chapter 3).

political style[23]. Antipopulist intellectuals and writers, like Juan José Sebreli (2018) and Mario Vargas Llosa (El Cronista 2016), favor this version. The rhetorical claim that Argentina has had "seventy years of decline", that Mauricio Macri usually quotes (e.g. LaPoliticaOnline 2022), is a version of this (as Macri's rise to power in 2015 happened amidst what could be called Peronism's 70th anniversary). An international example is Roger Cohen (2014)'s op-ed in *The New York Times*.

6) A sixth type of analysis affirms that Argentina's decline started with the 1970s onset of neoliberalism. There are several sub-types of this claim. The Kirchnerist version is characterized by a discontinuous periodization of neoliberalism and its identification with specific categories like the "national oligarchy". This is also usually the consensus view of professional historians and social scientists: in these cases, the decline is understood less as a cultural pathology and more like a relative decline of performance in several economic variables, not unlike the aforementioned "Latinoamericanization" or "end of Argentinian exceptionalism". A mix of a cultural self-flagellating *pathos* and a historical explanation that sets the 1970s as the watershed can be found in the famous conservative historian Luis Alberto Romero (2018a; 2018b).

Proposing a genealogy of the topic of the Argentinian failure poses a non-trivial historical problem. Kozel (2007, 2008) identifies three potential solutions to it in the literature. Firstly, some dubiously frame this *topos* as an essential or transhistorical trait of Argentinian culture (the example he gives is Scheines, 1993). Secondly, there is a position exemplified by Nicolas Shumway (1991)'s *The Invention of Argentina*: that the *Generación del '37,* the romantic group of intellectuals to which figures such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Juan Bautista Alberdi belonged, "created what has become an unfortunate genre in Argentine letters: the explanation of failure" (p. 112). The third

[23] Mauricio Macri recently caused an internal rift in his political coalition by claiming that the *radical* Yrigoyen, the first president chosen after the end of the electoral fraud that characterized the *República Conservadora,* anticipated Perón and Evita and may have been the "first populist" in the world. Causing disgust from his political allies of the *Unión Cívica Radical*, he was criticized by Jujuy's governor, the *radical* Gerardo Morales (as well as other party figures such as Facundo Manes) and had to explain his words in a public letter.

stance, in which Kozel situates his own work as well as the insights of figures such as Tulio Halperín Donghi, Oscar Terán, or Beatriz Sarlo, would place the popularization of the trope amidst the 1930 decade, recognizing "anticipations" of the trope in intellectuals of the immediately previous decades: here, the "contested memory" (to translate it to my own conceptualization) that would be blamed for failure would be the *Organización nacional*. Thus, the Argentinian failure appears as a discourse that counters the Argentinian hope, partially undermining it in several possible ways, without chronologically superseding it and maintaining some of its premises. This is exactly the reason Kozel uses to reject Shumway's position: Sarmiento and Alberdi were partly the architects of the Argentinian hope, and thus, it is premature to trace back to them the historically pessimist idea of the Argentinian failure, even when it is true, Kozel asserts, that their works were not purely optimist, containing significantly somber diagnoses of the Argentinian question. Lastly, the movie critic Quintín (Antín 2018) identifies the origin of the *topos* of Argentinian failure as a product of the recent global and local decline in living standards and upwards social mobility, as well as high levels of internal political polarization. While his hypothesis does not hold in the sense that the trope can be found decades before, the rise of neoliberalism and the widespread character of the reductionist ontology of political conflict that we have analyzed before do lend themselves to the Argentinian failure trope especially well.

It is true, even trivially so, that disillusion with Argentina's "manifest destiny" cannot predate the origin of the said myth. Yet, as we aim to better exemplify when we move from genealogy to performativity, one sees that, even nowadays, the *uses* of the trope of the Argentinian failure:

(a) are largely dependent on, still, this belief in an unrealized fate of greatness.

(b) are usually associated with tropes that are contemporary or predate the *topos* of the Argentinian hope, like the civilization-barbarism paradigm and the *Latin mentality* trope (that, as we have seen, pre-exists Argentina itself).

(c) are present even in sociopolitical and intellectual traditions that are skeptical of the liberal version of the Argentinian hope (in fact, the 1930s conservatives that Kozel studies as originators of the trope in its mature form are themselves opponents of that worldview). It follows that excessive emphasis on chronology and periodization could obscure this multi-layered, diachronic solidarity of meaning that we aim to capture with the theoretical construct *Argentinian declinism*.

# CHAPTER TWO:
# THE USES OF DECLINE IN THE EARLY DEMOCRATIC ERA (1983-2001)

## Historical introduction

On October 30th of 1983, the *radical* Raúl Alfonsín was elected president of Argentina with 51.7% of the votes, the first electoral defeat ever of Peronism in open elections. This would mark the end of a seven-year-long military dictatorship that had led to underground mass killings of political opponents (the *desaparecidos*), a radical shift in economic policy, and the infamous *Malvinas War,* among other grievances. Nicknamed "the father of democracy", Alfonsín led the country during the start of its democratic transition. Several events underpin public memory of the eighties: the optimist times of what is called by some the "primavera democrática" (Democratic spring), the World Cup victory, the trials prosecuting the military for human rights violations, the *carapintada* military uprisings that succeeded in guaranteeing judicial impunity for said human rights violations, and a series of economic failures that led to a series of general strikes, a significant increase of already high public debt[24] and to a hyperinflationary process by the end of the decade (dramatically accompanied by supermarket pillages). With the legitimacy of the government eroded, the general elections were anticipated, and the Peronist Carlos Menem was elected on May 14th, 1989.

Carlos Menem's presidency marked another turning point in Argentinian history. As soon as he assumed his office, he started issuing presidential decrees proclaiming amnesty for both the military (that continued the legacy of late Alfonsinism) and prominent members of the Leftist 1970s guerrilla, as part of a memorial discourse that we shall analyze later on. As hyperinflation was still ongoing, he addressed it with an ambitious "state reform" project aimed to stabilize relative prices. In what was seen as an unexpected twist, considering his electoral campaign, political style, and Peronist affiliation, his government carried over a neoliberal shock therapy that found one of its

[24] A common trend of the Latin American 1980s, often called the "lost decade".

most visible staples in the privatization (performed in several waves across the years) of the state's (a) phone company (b) flag carrier (c) railways (d) TV channels (e) radios (f) petrochemical centers (g) oil company (h) electrical companies (i) metro lines (j) steelmaker companies (k) parts of its social security system; among others. By early 1991, however, the "state reform", although still ongoing, had failed to stabilize relative prices and offset hyperinflation. The watershed that is usually used to periodize the end of the crisis (e.g. Svampa 2005; Llach and Gerchunoff 2018) is the start of Domingo Cavallo's tenure as the minister of Economy, in March 1991 (roughly two years into Menem's presidency), and his signature policy dating from the following month, the *Convertibilidad,* that made the Argentinian peso freely convertible to the United States dollar at a 1:1 fixed rate of exchange. This policy, of strong symbolic and memorial results, was correlative to price stability, a span of economic growth, capital investment, access to international credit markets, and rising productivity, as well as dramatic levels of unemployment and trade deficit. External shocks soon started testing the limits of this model, as competitive devaluations occurred in comparable emergent markets (such as México or Brazil) both made Argentina's less competitive and increased international anxiety over its potential devaluation (breaking the 1:1 parity), leading to capital flight (this started happening as early as in 1994, with the *Efecto Tequila*). Yet Menem gathered enough consensus to reform the Constitution that same year and get reelected in the following. Towards the end of the decade, a Peronism shaken by corruption scandals would get succeeded by a political coalition led by the conservative *radical* De La Rúa, who campaigned on keeping the *Convertibilidad* (that the Peronists, with Eduardo Duhalde as their presidential candidate, wanted to overturn). Yet anxiety over a potential devaluation, capital flight, and twin deficits were the background of several bank runs and confiscations of savings that led to De la Rúa's resignation two years into his mandate, signaling the end of the *Convertibilidad* and an unprecedented social uprising of vast historical consequences.

## Finding democracy

*Con la democracia no sólo se vota,*

*sino que también se come, se educa y se cura*

Raúl Alfonsín (educ.ar 2015b)

In October 1982, still amidst the dictatorship and a few months after losing the *Guerra de las Malvinas*, a group of social historians centered around a study group called PEHESA (Programa de Estudios de Historia Económica y Social Americana), a group that would soon dominate their field, published an article named "¿Dónde anida la democracia?" (Where does democracy nest?) in the well-known literary magazine *Punto de Vista* (PEHESA, 1982). While their text is more analytical than normative (akin to what was their usual style), they are essentially pondering the question of the hour: what are, if any, the historical grounds of Argentinian democracy? The severely undemocratic recent past of the time, especially from the point of view of electoral politics, led them to argue that Argentinian democratic tradition had instead been historically grounded in cellular organizations born from civil society (mutual aids, clubs, *gremios*, *bibliotecas populares,* trade unions and the like), and only sparingly in political parties (in the short spans in which electoral democracy was not restricted). This is not the place to evaluate the merits of this argument, but rather to point out that Argentinian democracy could not be taken for granted, nor be easily found in the past. It had to be invented.

This problem was not specific to Argentina at all: in those years, Southern cone countries were undergoing a democratic transition, not unlike what was being experienced in Spain, what would happen in the Eastern European 1990s, or what had happened for Portugal during the 1970s. In all those cases, a transition to a market economy and a democratic political regime were happening simultaneously[25]. It was not easy to relate previous experiences of democracy with what was

[25] A concept that has been proposed to portray this critical timelapse is *third wave of democratization* (Huntington 1993).

underway. As a key political concept, the meaning of democracy is fundamentally contestable and always redefined (Koselleck, 2004). That the Argentinian tradition was comparatively undemocratic to other traditions would not have been obvious at all during the early nineteenth century, for instance. In 1816, when independence was proclaimed, the Provincias Unidas del Río de la Plata was the only standing Latin American republic in an Atlantic world shifting rightwards under the sign of the Holy Alliance and the divine right of monarchs. During the 1820s, the electoral practices of Buenos Aires lacked any form of census suffrage, nominally granting the right to vote to all adult males, a global oddity in the early nineteenth century (Ternavasio 2002; Sabato 2018). Yet, from the point of view of the 1980s, previous experiences of democracy appeared lacking and non-contemporary. Looking back, what one saw was the six military coups and five military governments in the twentieth century, the pre-dictatorship political violence of the 1970s, the 1955-1973 *semi-democracy* (Cavarozzi, 1986) tainted by the proscription of Peronism, the widespread electoral fraud during the 1930s *Década Infame* (called "patriotic fraud" by local conservatives, a phrase possibly coined by Buenos Aires' Governor Manuel Fresco himself, see López 2011), and the fraud of the *República Conservadora* in the 1880-1916 period (where both local socialists and ruling conservatives themselves called these practices "política criolla", symptomatically mislabelling this non-local phenomenon), and the unanimist "democratic" elections of one party during Rosism. The two most recent experiences of prolonged democratic government were the Radical presidencies (1916-1930) and the original tenure of Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955), also posited contested memories for both the right (as both leaders were accused of "demagogues" and "populists") and the left (with Perón's political persecution of communists in his original tenure, as well as his complicity with the killings carried by the parastatal *Triple A* in the seventies; regarding Yrigoyen, the several massacres of workers occurred during his presidency have to be mentioned, with a very popular movie depicting one of these, *La Patagonia Rebelde (*1974), being rescreened in cinemas as soon as democracy returned, after years of censorship).

Even if Argentinian democracy had no historical grounds, there was a huge demand for it: even the Leftist activists and intellectuals that had minimized its relevance before (as a mere "burgeois" formality, for instance) were amidst a process of intellectual self-critique that implied revalorizing democracy and human rights (see Vezzetti, 2009). Inventing a democratic tradition, in any case, does not merely imply faking it. And, as we shall see, idealizations of segments of the past do take place, but this co-exists with its criticism, with a refoundationalist aspiration of taking distance and starting anew. What inventing a democratic tradition does entail is, however, the involvement of a myriad of social actors. And this was not the priority of the aforementioned PEHESA historians: as it has been widely studied, the generation of professional social historians that rose to prominence in the 1980s focused on "modernizing" and depoliticizing the discipline, raising it to international academic standards at the opportunity cost of disengaging with the broader public that is society (see Di Meglio 2011). Meanwhile, the popular historians of the previous decades had fallen out of grace, delegitimized for their association with the political extremism of the recent past (see Acha, 2012). To sum it up, the professionalization of academic history and the marginalization of revisionist popular history gave historical writing a marginal role in the making of a democratic consensus in the 1980s. It has been argued that, in times of crisis, the public is particularly driven to engage with the past in a meaningful way (Selbin, 2012; Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998). Because the Argentinian historical profession lost social relevance, a gap was left. Politicians and filmmakers, among others, were relevant to this goal.

## Argentinian historical cinema

We will now study how Argentinian historical cinema helped shape a democratic consensus by portraying Argentina's contested memories in a new light. We will focus on the movies *Camila* and *La Historia Oficial* in particular, speaking about *La república perdida* in the next section. The popularity of these movies in the 1980s cannot be understated: to illustrate, a quantitative approach can be taken (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

| Title | Year of release | Viewers | Director | Producer |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Camila | 1984 | 2.305.000 | María Luisa Bemberg | GEA Cinematog. (Argentina)/Impala SA (Spain) |
| La historia oficial | 1985 | 1.722.000 | Luis Puenzo | - |
| Tango feroz | 1993 | 1.600.000 | Marcelo Piñeyro | Mandala |
| Los colimbas se divierten | 1985 | 1.508.000 | Enrique Carreras | Aries Cinematográfica |
| Comodines | 1997 | 1.385.125 | Alejandro Nisco | - |
| Pasajeros de una pesadilla | 1984 | 1.168.000 | Fernando Ayala | Aries Cinematográfica |
| Dibu, la película | 1997 | 1.162.905 | Oliveri y Stoessel | - |
| Rambito y Rambón, primera misión | 1986 | 1.126.000 | Enrique Carreras | Aries Cinematográfica |
| Los extraterrestres | 1983 | 1.125.000 | Enrique Carreras | Aries Cinematográfica |
| Atrapadas | 1984 | 1.050.000 | Anibal Di Salvo | Carlos L. Mentasti/Luis A. Scalella |
| La furia | 1997 | 1.046.266 | Juan Bautista Stagnaro | - |
| Los fierecillos se divierten | 1983 | 925.000 | Nicolás Carreras | Aries Cinematográfica |
| Caballos salvajes | 1995 | 920.000 | Marcelo Piñeyro | Mansala |
| La república perdida | 1983 | 902.000 | Miguel Perez | Noran SRL-E Vanoli |

List of box-office data of national movies, 1983-1997. Source: Getino (2005).

The dramatic feature films (see Rosenstone, 2014) *Camila* (1984) and *La historia oficial* (1985) were at the top of the box office statistics[26] for the whole decade when it comes to tickets sold, besting

[26] It must be said that, while indicative to a certain extent of popularity, the circulation of a movie cannot be studied only using box office data. For instance, the hugely successful Esperando la carroza (1985), a grotesque comedy that has more presence in today's Argentinian internet culture than any of the films we are going to cover, had much more sober numbers, box office-wise, when it was originally released. Its wider circulation could be traced back to its frequent screenings on national TV.

all national movies from 1983 onwards, as well as all but one foreign film for the 1984-1987 period (Pánik 1989).

Historical documentaries of the time were also noteworthy among the Argentinian public, with *La república perdida* (1983) being the second most-watched film (encompassing fiction and nonfiction) of the year in which democracy got restored, and the most-watched documentary (historical or not) of the whole 1983-1998 period[27].

Lastly, internationally, the most critically acclaimed Argentinian films were also historical, with *La historia oficial* winning an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1986 and *Camila* being a nominee for the same category in the previous year.

*Camila* (1984), the drama film directed by María Luisa Bemberg, fictionalizes the true story of the nineteenth-century forbidden love of the socialite Camila O'Gorman and the priest Ladislao, two young members of an aristocratic elite. After months of fleeing, trying to start a new life far away, they are captured by the regime (the authoritarian *rosismo*) and killed without trial. The injustice is portrayed focusing on a series of grievances reflective of the cultural *zeitgeist* of the Democratic Spring: authoritarianism, extrajudicial killings, exile, delation, censorship, religion, and the traditional family appearing as societal evils that need to be challenged. Its massive appeal is also related to a very engaging love story (which spawned several historical novels and biographies), which is being told by borrowing tropes from melodrama and soap operas, such as the piano leitmotiv of the soundtrack and the reading aloud of love letters. The intertextuality of several 1990s soap operas and melodramas established with Camila has been in fact studied (Jonas Aharoni 2012). Yet, this does not mean that the movie is what Rosenstone (2014) would call, a "costume drama 'which...misused the past as a mere setting for tales of adventure and love": it is, first and

[27] Another source of circulation that cannot be measured that easily is the pedagogical use of *La república perdida* in the classrom, very common for our period of study.

foremost, a political allegory. It does have to be said that its costumes are remarkable: the "*política cromática*" (Salvatore, 1998) of the regime, in which wearing red clothes was heavily encouraged and wearing divisas punzó (red badges with rosista symbology) was mandatory, is accurately shown. Women fan themselves while grown men sport sideburns and combover haircuts. The rich wear red dresses, *fracs* and *levitas*. Camila is not allowed to speak up at the dinner table. The family owns slaves: Camila's father laughs condescendingly in one scene, and a different slave comforts Camila after her grandmother's demise in another scene. Phenomenologically, all this worldbuilding makes the viewer feel estranged from Camila's world. Yet, steadily, the analogies come forward: Camila gets smuggled literature and watches in horror how her clandestine librarian is found beheaded by the *mazorqueros*, goons of the regime who, very much like 1976-1983 militares, entered at night into the homes of the regime's political opponents to murder them. Camila reads aloud poems about the sadness of exile written by Echeverría, the romantic intellectual that fled to Montevideo during those days, and for the viewer, this resonates with the refugees of the most recent military dictatorship. Camila's unsympathetic father, who the viewer is driven to severely dislike, has her cat drowned in the sea, in a reference to the future *vuelos de la muerte* of 1976-1983. There is nuance to the narrative, as well: if Echeverría, who died abroad as merely a young poet, is seen in a positive light, his romantic colleagues who eventually became the political leaders of the post-rosist days are perceived more skeptically, with Camila's mother complains about how they're instigating her daughter's death, and an op-ed that future president Sarmiento wrote for Chile's *El Mercurio*, in which he criticizes Rosas for not yet punishing heresy with death, is read aloud amidst a debate among Rosist politicians regarding what to do with the captured couple. Rosas is present neither there nor in the whole movie: numerous paintings of him are shown and get close-ups, sometimes cutting from a scene of the two lovers: the movie seems to imply he is always watching. Similarly, the movie cuts from a scene of the two lovers kissing to the slaughtering of cattle done by Camila's

father himself, signaling their impending doom. The portrayal of the Catholic Church and the Jesuits is also ambivalent (Ladislao, himself a priest, originally bonds with Camila because they both oppose the regime), with reactionary, moderate, and radical figures within the church being shown (something which heavily resonated with the perception of the Church of the time in which the movie was made, as among them there had been both dictatorship collaborationists and social revolutionaries affiliated with liberation theology).

*La historia oficial* (1985)'s protagonist, Alicia, is a history teacher married to a government official amidst the dictatorship. After reconnecting with an exiled friend, she starts realizing what was transpiring in the country. The question of collaboration and responsibility of the civil society at large is addressed here[28]. Alicia is an unwilling collaborator: the movie tells the story of her quest to find out if her adopted daughter was appropiated. Humbled by both some of her colleagues (who know about what is going on) and students, who use revisionist talking points and are inspired by the less contested figures of the historical pantheon, such as the May revolutionary Mariano Moreno, here read as a father of democracy, or the national anthem with which the movie starts. Her husband's family, led by his father (an immigrant anarchist who fought in the Spanish civil war), despises their own child for what he does. Her long-lost friend, who retells the story of how she was tortured, always knew as well: how could Alicia not? She networks with both her friend and the *Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* to find out if her daughter was appropriated, although these lose relevance as the plot goes on. Alicia has a brief comeback in which she uncharacteristically rehashes the *Teoría de los dos demonios* (a then common quasi-justification of state terrorism, painted as an equivalent societal evil to left-wing guerrilla extremism). It is ultimately an



[28] For a more modern look at an analogous phenomenon, *The Act of Killing* (2012) offers a glance at some perpetrators of the Indonesian mass killings of 1965-1966, making them the protagonists of a very unorthodox historical documentary. In both films, the perspective of either an (unwilling) collaborator or the victimizer is centered. This is handled more gracefully in *The Act of Killing*.

episode of domestic violence that makes Alicia leave his husband in the movie's finale, leaving the question of her daughter's identity unanswered.

This national cinema of the 1980s would soon be followed by a rather lackluster performance in the first half of the 1990s, in which both the number of film releases and viewership declined. 1994 marked both the lowest point of this (only 1.91% of the tickets sold in the country were for national movies, and only 11 Argentinian movies were released at all) and also the relevant watershed for a resurgence, as in September 1994, the "Cinema law" (n°24.377) was passed, partly reversing this process by providing substantially more funding to local movies[29]. The resurgence of Argentinian cinema after this would now convey a very different aesthetical sensibility. Argentinian historical cinema of the sixties and seventies (we have mentioned before *La hora de los hornos*), with themes such as political insurgence and social revolution, was out of touch with current political discourse once the 1980s arrived. Likewise, the 1980s cinema, in which even those who struggle economically live in suburban houses with gardens and hold formal jobs and even own small businesses (such as in *La historia oficial, Plata Dulce,* or *Esperando la carroza*) contrasts heavily with the *Nuevo cine argentino* of the 1990s, in which social marginality and the ennui of its epoch feature way more prominently (see e.g. Pizza, birra, faso from 1998, as well as the TV show *Okupas* from 2000). What should be kept in mind here regarding *Camila* and *La historia oficial* is how grievances and memories from the past (the May Revolution, Rosismo, the conflict between federals and unitarists, the Spanish civil war) are being brought into the conversation for political allegory and characterization.



[29] Symptomatically financing it, partly, with a tax on DVD and video renting and sales.

## The rise and fall of Alfonsinism

Three aspects of Alfonsinism will concern us here: (a) their periodization of "decline", seen through their propagandistic movie *La república perdida (*1983) and Alfonsín's book *La cuestión argentina* (1981) (b) the relationship of said historical discourse and the human rights trials (c) the progressive undermining, as the years went on, of the substantial conception of democracy Alfonsinism originally proposed.

As we anticipated, Alfonsinists periodized decline focused on the disruption of the democratic and republican order that started in *La década infame,* with the 1930 *coup d'état* that overthrew their party figure Hipólito Yrigoyen. The start of Alfonsín (1981)'s book *La cuestión argentina*[30]*,* published two years before his electoral victory, is eloquent in this respect. The starting phrase is instructive: "I was born 53 years ago and, for the last 50, Argentina has been sliding further and further in the slope of its decadence" (7). There is also an use of the Argentinian exceptionalist trope here (in its "anomaly" variant that posits Argentinian history as especially baffling), as he states that it's equally true that in 1880 nobody would have foreseen that "poor, inhabited, remote" Argentina would arrive to 1930 being "the first nation of Latin America", "enlightening the continent with its culture", "be democratically stable", "and find itself among the first five nations of the earth according per capita income". Here, the manifest destiny trope is being played out in a *sui generis* way that attributes to the Argentina of 1930, which had been governed by *radicales* for twelve years, the commonplace image of the *República Conservadora* as the realization of the manifest destiny. "In turn", Alfonsín continues, nobody would have imagined that in 1980 Argentina would become a

[30] Recently, Carlos Altamirano implied that Dante Caputo and Ernesto Sábato were, at least partially, the ghostwriters of this book, in the conference "Transición y democracia: generaciones en diálogo", during the "Los intelectuales en la transición" talk, held in the Torcuato Di Tella University. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLRbenD0ww0

"second rate nation in Latin America", swept away by "intolerance, violence, and economic decadence" (all translations are mine, 1981: 9).

In the second chapter of the book, Alfonsín identifies a deep cause for the cycle inaugurated in 1930: the relative decline (at the rhythm of the worsening of the terms of trade) of the "rural" and "speculative" national oligarchy. The weakening of their position would have made them abandon democratic pretenses, starting an offense that failed to be stopped because of several political errors of Radicalism (in its Antiperonist efforts) and Peronism (in its rejection of democracy). There is a strong positive integration of Perón amidst the narrative, which was a novelty that set Alfonsinists apart from the *radical* stance of the previous decades. During his tenure, Alfonsín would proclaim his movement a "Tercer movimiento histórico" ("third historical movement"), with the previous two being the eras of Yrigoyen and Perón. In *La cuestión argentina*, Alfonsín proclaims that the R*adicales* and Peronists agree on social matters and disagree on their conception of democracy. Argentina is already socially democratic, he adds, although every passing day less so (in a reference to the aforementioned "Latinoamericanization" trope, see chapter 1), and that political democratization is what would stop this.

Two years later, released just two months before the elections that marked the return of democracy and funded by the *radicales, La república perdida* (1983, "The Lost Republic" in English) came out. As we have discussed, it went on to become the most-watched documentary of at least the 1983-1997 period. It is a historical documentary in the expository mode (Nichols 2017), in which a "voice of god" narrates over archival footage, in a fashion that seeks to produce an effect of objectivity, the story of the country in the 1929-1976 period. The narrative of *La cuestión argentina* is basically reproduced here. The fight between the "oligarchy" and the people, and between the democratic and the antidemocratic, is the *locus* of this story, in which political violence from all affiliations is criticized (Cappellutti 2022). Towards the end, the documentary becomes propagandistic, with the contemporary responses of main *radical* figures to certain phenomena being shown as

representative of "the people" in those days. Perón and Evita[31] are vindicated in their commitment to social justice (the same cheery leitmotiv that is played when heroes of the *radicales* 'historical pantheon show up is used for their appearances), although no still active Peronist politicians of the time, competitors of the *radical* party, are given the same treatment.

Commitment to human rights also set Alfonsín apart during the campaign. He was in a good place to capitalize on the quick undermining of the military regime after the Malvinas War, as he had opposed it almost entirely, besides commenting on it positively on the *Crónica* newspaper the day on which the war was declared, the 2nd of April of 1982 (see Aboy Carlés, 2001). His stance on prosecuting the military for human rights violations differentiated him from softer or more inconsistent positions, such as the ones of the Peronist candidate Ítalo Lúder, who more clearly conceded to military demands regarding self-amnesties and the possibility of military courts taking care of prosecuting the military itself. As Aboy Carlés (2001) shows, though, Alfonsín himself had a softer stance (compared to the human rights organizations), conceding that lower-ranked officials should not be held responsible (of course, up to what rank it could be argued that someone is just following orders is merely arbitrary).

Political democracy, as we have seen, appears in Alfonsín's discourse as a dynamic factor promoting socioeconomic equality. This is the meaning of his famous catchphrase "With democracy you do not only vote: you eat, you teach and you heal" (educ.ar 2015b), part of his inaugural speech as president. This expansive, substantive meaning of democracy as a solution to, as we have seen, the end of the "Argentinian exception", implies not only open elections but also human rights, economic development, and distributive justice. Yet, as Maristella Svampa (2005) argues, the disconnect between a formal-electoral democracy and the originally envisioned substantive democracy grew clearer as time went on and the government proved unable to void

[31] Even very much controversial aspects of their legacy are laudatorily reported, such as Evita's visit to Franco's Spain (very symbolic for their regime, as Franco was geopolitically isolated during the immediate post-war).

the economic crisis. Franco (2015) shows the contingent historical developments that allowed the initial democratic triumphalism, like the collapse of the military regime after the Malvinas war, which has to be kept in mind to explain the initial weakness of the military to define the terms of the transition (very evident when compared to other cases such as the Brazilian and the Chilean, see Acuña and Smulovitz 1996). As early as September 1984, the shift in economic policy towards a pro-IMF stance and a growing "consensus for the need for structural adjustments" can be traced (Massano 2018). This is also reflected in the evolution of the political discourse of *radical* figures such as Eduardo Angeloz, governor of Córdoba during Alfonsín's tenure and the presidential candidate defeated by Menem in 1989. An initial emphasis on a substantial definition of democracy and its promises is later on traded for a discourse that centers efficiency in administration (Philp 2004). The lackluster performance (see Llach and Gerchunoff 2018) of the following economic plans set to mitigate the crisis, the *Plan Austral* (1985) and *Plan Primavera* (1988), signaled the weakness that the military would progressively profit from[32], pushing for impunity laws that would eventually come in the shape of the *Ley de punto final* (1986) and *Ley de obediencia debida* (1987).

It is true, as we have seen, that differentiating between degrees of responsibility was something that Alfonsín had been doing since the campaign. From this, it has been argued that there is continuity between the two moments (Aboy Carlés 2001), but that does not take into consideration the fundamentally arbitrary nature of the judgment regarding where to set the boundary here. Decontextualized campaign statements should not be used to create a formalist *mythology of coherence* (Skinner, 1969) that would be "Alfonsín's stance on responsibility": an initial weak negotiating position for the military made possible what was later blocked, once the government had lost its stability and was being challenged on several fronts. Moreover, there is another problem posed by the trials, which is where to start them. René Favaloro, an Argentinian medic of notorious reputation in the country for standardizing the procedure called coronary artery bypass surgery,

[32] The most dramatic episodes associated with this are the *Carapintada* uprisings demanding amnesty (three times under Alfonsín and once under Menem).

was invited to join the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP from now on) and ultimately resigned when the possibility of prosecuting the political violence of the 1973-1976 period (which would have implied the prosecution of several Peronist figures) was dismissed. This was done for Peronists not to ask the trials to start in 1955 instead, which would involve several civic actors, including *radicales,* in the political violence. What is interesting about *Camila* and *La historia oficial* is how they show that the grievances from the past, what we call *contested memories,* cannot be just dropped (neither by society nor by political coalitions) in the face of a simpler, legal periodization. However, as we are about to see for the Menemist case, strategies to deal with them do not have to be agonist and dualist.

## Anti-statism, reconciliation, and forgetfulness during the Menemist years

In this section, we will analyze the shifts in historical discourse that Menemism produced amidst the intensification of neoliberalism and the problems the Argentinian transition to democracy was facing, epitomized by the generalization of judicial impunity for human rights abuses.

As soon as he rose to power in 1989, Menem started issuing a series of presidential decrees giving presidential pardons that ensured the impunity of not only lower-ranked officials but, ultimately, the whole military leadership, as well as the leadership of the left-wing extremist guerrilla and several civilians. As Svampa (2005) retells, this was a nod to the aforementioned *Teoría de los dos demonios* that, at first, gathered opposition not only from human rights organizations but also the broader society. The way this was legitimized implied a radically different conception of historicity compared to the one Alfonsín defended: the need to forget and reconcile (see Perochena 2022b). Menem deploys the *dual country* trope to subvert it. As we have seen, in his 1989 inaugural speech, Menem (educ.ar 2015c: 6) proclaimed "The visible country and the real country are over. I come to unify those two Argentinas. I come to fight for the reunion of those two fatherlands". He claimed to reject the moral high ground of acting as a "political prosecutor" in a diatribe against a "history of decadence" (4). Instead, he exhorted for unity asking to achieve Argentina's "destiny

of greatness" (7) (all translations are mine). Regarding democracy, he claimed that "if democracy is useless to make people happier, then it doesn't serve any purpose" (16). This instrumental rather than procedural conception of democracy (see Landwehr and Leininger 2019) was unthinkable six years before, yet it reflected the undermining of the democratic transition's legitimacy, a process in which Menemists had responsibilities while, simultaneously, being a process they had to deal with. Later on, in 1994, after the *Caso Carrasco* (when a young conscript was tortured and killed by peers and superiors), mandatory conscription was ended by presidential decree, canonically one of the measures that led to the disempowerment of the military that would characterize the Argentinian twenty-first century.

In the first chapter, regarding the civilization-barbarism paradigm, we saw that it allowed not merely axiological inversions (with "Civilization" becoming undesirable and "Barbarism" laudable), but also a more dialectical deployment in which both qualities can be either positive or negative. Yet when Borges or Sarmiento exalted the barbarism that nonetheless lies within, reference to contested memories is permanent, under a historicist discourse being played out for either aesthetical, political, or epistemological purposes. Whereas the dialectic that Menemists proposed, the "end of the dual country", implied a reconciliation that entailed moving away from contested memories. Menem claimed to want to be the president of "Rosas and Sarmiento, Mitre and Facundo, Ángel Vicente Peñaloza and Juan Bautista Alberdi, Pellegrini and Yrigoyen, Perón and Balbín" (educ.ar 2015c: 6). Soon after the presidential inauguration, he repatriated Juan Manuel de Rosas' mortal remains, a symbolic act Camila Perochena (2022b) analyzes as part of the reconciliation strategy, something paradoxical only at a first glance. In the discourse he gave amidst the repatriation ceremony (educ.ar 2015d), he forewarns that he does not want to revive old battles, helping to foster national unity instead. To compliment Rosas, he selects a series of quotes from his major opponents, like Sarmiento, Alberdi, and Urquiza (the one who defeated him, forcing his decades-long exile in Southampton). Claims by Sarmiento and Alberdi portraying, under a romantic epistemology, that Rosas reflects his land and people are descontextualized by Menem as images

of the reconciliation he is seeking. He even calls Alberdi "maybe the first (historical) revisionist" (4). History, he says, cannot be a "burden", a "petty opinion" or a "hurtful memory" (5). And due to this, Argentina can finally "say goodbye to the country of failure" (3, all translations mine).

The negative areas of the past in the Menemist discourse were both more concrete (hyperinflation) and more abstract (Statism) than the ones previously seen. Menem framed himself as the one who was able to stop hyperinflation, positing a dichotomy between his rule and the return of "chaos" (Bonnet 2007). As Aboy Carlés (2001) claims, the role the Malvinas War had in Alfonsín's initial rhetoric was comparable to how Menem treated hyperinflation. It was an extremely recent memory, as well (there was another spike of it amidst the two initial Menemist years of instability), and one that seriously undermined the credibility of more economically heterodox enunciators. Statism, in this sense, was another negative area of Menemist historical discourse, with the Argentinian state being characterized by him as "elephantiasic, costly and inefficient" (Fair 2011, translation mine). Being from the Peronist party himself, Menem could not draw from all the negative associations between Peronism, statism, and populism that are usually available for other sociopolitical actors, as we have seen. Then again, reuniting Peronism and neoliberalism was not unlike repatriating Rosas' remains and justifying it with quotes from Sarmiento, Alberdi, and Urquiza. But this does make the discourse significantly more abstract, more akin to the transhistorical claims about national psychology or mentality that we covered in chapter one.

Besides the value of reconciliation, the more positive tropes being deployed by Menem had to do with both Argentinian exceptionalism and manifest destiny. The idea that, under him, Argentina had "returned to the world" and to being a "normal country" with a bright future of geopolitical preeminence was discoursively emphasized (Fair, 2009) and symbolically reinforced by Argentina's entry to the G20 or the *Convertibilidad*. The *Convertibilidad* had made a strong symbolic impact on Argentinian society, which is why it was so electorally costly not only to campaign for its removal but also to suggest keeping the fixed rate of exchange while going for a different but still fixed-rate

(different from the 1:1 parity between the peso and the dollar), as the technocrats of the government ambitioned when, as we have seen, devaluations of other emergent markets started pressuring the viability of Argentina's model (Llach and Gerchunoff 2018; Svampa 2005). Ultimately, the opposition to neoliberal Peronism that defeated it in the 1999 elections, where Menem could not run anymore after already having his one re-election, commended both the economic model in general and *Convertibilidad* in particular. Reunified under De La Rúa, they deployed the tropes of Argentinian declinism regarding moral decline and corruption to contest the official discourse. Privatization of national industries as a principle was treated in a positive fashion, whereas specific privatizations were claimed to have been done in corrupt ways, but still defended in the name of "legal certainty" (Fair 2013). If by 1983 the incipient two-party system of the democratic transition was led by sectors that, as we have quoted Alfonsín (1981) saying before, agreed on social issues (meaning distributive justice) while differing in their conceptions of democracy, by the 1990s this duality had been bridged already, as symbolized by Domingo Cavallo's new tenure at the Minister of Economy in 2001, amidst a *radical* government. Not even eight months later, however, history would get moving again.

# CONCLUSION

*Perder es lo normal y a partir de ahí se construye todo.*

Axel Torres, Spanish sports journalist.

In this conclusion, we shall summarize our findings and propose some of the ways in which this thesis can contribute to historiography.

## 1983-2001 at the *longue durée* of Argentinian declinism

During the 1983-2001 period, democratization and neoliberalism have evoked both optimism and alienation in Argentinians. It was through Argentinian declinism that they contested the meaning and direction of these processes.

The Alfonsinists originally defined decline as a fundamentally institutional phenomenon, brought about by the weakening of democracy that started with the 1930 *coup d'état*, and attempted to counter it by proposing an ambitious conception of democracy that included both distributive justice and the protection of human rights. This resonated deeply with an Argentinian society still eager for historical discourse. However, as the years passed on, their position grew weaker. They started arguing for the necessity of economic orthodoxy and state reform, while their political claudication to a still rebellious military eager to block the human rights trials signaled the end of the cultural *zeitgeist* of the "Democratic Spring". Menemists engaged with history by deepening late Alfonsinism's caving to military demands, and this was done in the name of a political reconciliation discourse that attempted to bridge the gap of the "dual country" by simultaneously vindicating figures that are often pitted against in historical discourse. This reframing of the Argentinian past was functional to their ambitious mix of Peronist identity and neoliberal worldview. Statism and hyperinflation were posited as the symptoms of the Argentinian failure, while the *Convertibilidad*

symbolized a new rendition of the manifest destiny trope: the idea that Argentina was on its way to becoming a first-world country.

## *Argentinian declinism* and the social sciences

As we have discussed, the social sciences are not immune to turning the rhetorical tropes that characterize *Argentinian declinism* into theoretical concepts. This clouds the study of both Argentinian history in particular and of social science research in general. In this sense, more awareness regarding the conceptual history of these prejudices could raise the standards of what we deem acceptable to study and understand our societies.

We have already alluded to the historiographical problems of subscribing to a harsh distinction between a "Latin" and an "Anglo-Saxon" mentality. National exceptionalism can become another methodological trap worth discussing. When it comes to declinist discourse, we have argued that the study of the Argentinian case yields interesting parallels with other cases. The comparison with the Italian case (Rosso 2021) proves instructive. A series of grievances (the loss of relevance on the world stage, economic stagnation, and so on) is followed by a collective introspection about its alleged causes (an Iberian mentality, the lack of a central state, and so forth) that lends itself for a political weaponization carried over by sociopolitical actors (from journalistic pundits to the Italian fascist regime) attempting to rethink and reshape this past they deem unacceptable. These analogies, widely obscured by national exceptionalist tropes, suggest that there is value in a research program about the genealogy, uses and tropes of decline discourses on several scales (below and above the nation as well), and could even lead to the development of a formal model. This work attempts to join many other efforts, alluded to in our literature review, to set such a research project in motion.

In any case, one must not conclude from all of this that there is not anything particularly unique about, for instance, the Argentinian identity. Comparisons have to be made and common processes

ought to be tracked, yet the national scale provides a useful standpoint of inquiry and research. As Tulio Halperin Donghi (2009) asserted regarding the issue of the originality and novelty of the *Revolución de Mayo*, put into question by Hispanophile historians of ideas (who argued that the revolution was made in the name of an older "Spanish" tradition instead of an Enlightened "French" one): even if a glimpse of truth were to shine through their views, they would be wise not to forget that what they are studying is, still, a revolution[33]. Likewise, the socially constructed nature of nations and of the discourse about them does not make both of those things less real. Moreover, excessive focus on "myth-busting" nationalist tropes can be both one-sided and alienating to the broader public (as it implies shedding away the categories that make the past legible for them). It is our hope that these national particularities can be better captured not at the level of the impressionist and ill-informed take (e.g. Macri's "Argentinian society is the biggest failure of the latest seventy years"), but at the scale of the historian's work.



[33] I would like to thank Juan Antonio Quaglia for originally making this analogy to me.

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