

Campo against Ciudad?

The Resonance of Old Dichotomies in the 2008

Argentine Grower's Conflict

Lily Reed

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A group of men dressed in the traditional gaucho wear of pantaloons, a wide belt, a beret and a red scarf idle and chat in the middle of a remote Argentine highway. Women sit next to them sipping on mate, a traditional tea that is widely popular in the country. Among them are men dressed in expensive rural wear, some sitting in the back of their new 4×4 trucks. One man holds a sign that reads “*Viva la lucha del campo!*” (Long live the fight of the countryside!) They have set up a blockade that prevents agricultural products from reaching the port or markets of Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. Cars that wish to pass must first accept a pamphlet and are handed a bumper sticker with the words “*Estoy con el Campo*” (“I’m with the Countryside”) printed over the sky-blue and white stripes of the Argentine flag.

This was a common scene during the conflict between the rural growers and the Argentine national government that began in March of 2008 and continues to afflict the country. In response to an increase in export taxes on crops such as soy and sunflower oil, the growers set up a lockout that forced the government to negotiate on their terms. The course of the confrontation resurrected old resentments and restored them to a primary position in the national consciousness. A set of binary forces - civilization|barbarity, urban|rural, Buenos Aires|Interior, progress|tradition- which have influenced Argentine politics, society, and culture since its formation nearly 200 years ago, stood at the core of national debate. This paper will review the persistence of these dichotomies, both during the conflict and throughout the country’s history, that prevail despite changes in the country’s political, social, and natural landscape. This binary model, which rests on the base of Domingo F. Sarmiento’s book *Facundo*, the text of one of Argentina’s founding fathers, obscures the complexities of the conflict and prevents

the dialogue necessary to come to a resolution. These dichotomies have been reinforced through their prevalence in literature, economic policy, and divisive rhetoric on the part of both the government and the private sectors. The inability to overcome the polarities on which the nation was founded has led to a fractured and dissonant society today.

In order to demonstrate this divide, I first provide a brief overview of the recent conflict and its context. I will analyze some of the rhetoric in newspapers, government statements, blogs, and even song lyrics that were emerging in both the urban and rural areas of Argentina that reinforced the tension between the capital and the interior, between the bureaucrats and the farmers. Next I survey instances in Argentine history when this dichotomy has been particularly evident, for example during the formation of the country in the nineteenth century or the intensive rural-urban migration that occurred during the twentieth century to show the emergence and prevalence of the dichotomies in national discourse. Literary tradition in particular has perpetuated the conflict between these “two Argentinas”, maintaining rural and urban spheres as separate and antagonizing forces. Until Argentina accepts and incorporates the various characteristics of her national identity, unity and progress may be futile goals.

The Conflict: Between the Growers and the Government

Argentina is one of the biggest agricultural exporters in the world, in large part due to the exceptional fertility of its soils in the Pampas region. In recent decades, the main export products have shifted from meat, wheat, and corn to soy and sunflower. Increased demand and high prices in international markets intensified production and have led to the expansion of the agricultural frontier into traditionally unproductive areas.

This development is especially due to soy production, which is displacing cattle ranching as well as the cultivation of crops such as wheat and corn, causing concern about the ability of the *campo* to provide the basic foodstuffs for its own people. The sharp devaluation of the Argentine peso after the 2001 economic crisis has more than tripled the value of exports, threatening the nation with an unbalanced flow of money that could trigger inflation.¹ These factors, in conjunction with the Argentine government's neoliberal policies of the 1990's, have changed the face of Argentina's rural landscape.² Small and medium sized producers are disappearing at an alarming rate. The emergence of new actors reveals the agribusiness character that is now defining the countryside. These actors include multinational transgenic seed corporations or "sowing pools" or *pools de siembra*, which, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, are speculative investment funds that contract land to third parties for the large-scale production of cereals.³

In October of 2007, Argentina elected a new president, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, wife of the previous president, Nestor Kirchner. Nestor Kirchner was credited with pulling the nation out of one of its worst economic crises through tough fiscal regulations that kept inflation to a minimum.⁴ Analysts attribute much of the nation's impressive recovery to growth in the agricultural sector. As the revenues for crop exports increased, taxation by the federal government increased as well. In order to take

¹ Alexei Barrionuevo, "Conflicts Hang Over Argentine Leader," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2008.

² For further discussion of the transformations of rural Argentina and soy expansion, see Diego Domínguez and Pablo Sabatino's "Con la soja al cuello: crónica de un país hambriento" *Los tormentos de la materia. Aportes para una ecología política latinoamericana*. March 2006.

³ Land and Plant Nutrition Management Service, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "Fertilizer use by crop in Argentina," (Rome, 2004).

⁴ Barrionuevo, "Conflicts Hang Over Argentine Leader."

advantage of the monumental revenues that were pouring into rural Argentina, Fernandez established “Resolución 125”, implementing a system of mobile taxes which would increase the amount of state-withheld taxes from 35 per cent to 44 percent in accord with the price of exports. She argued that the nation as a whole had the right to benefit from the wealth accumulating in the interior and claimed that tax revenues would be used to benefit redistribution schemes. The decision was made without consulting the national congress, bringing into question the concentration of power in the federal government.⁵

The growers were outraged, viewing the taxes as confiscations and angered by the fact that their increased economic weight did not translate into greater political representation. President Kirchner underestimated the reaction of the rural growers, who materialized their threats to blockade roads on March 12, 2008 when the four major agricultural groups united to protest the increase in taxes. The roadblocks prevented grains from making it to port for export as well as limiting the flow of produce, meat, and dairy to the internal market, causing food shortages in the urban centers. The president responded with a loaded speech that accused the protestors of extortion and labeled them as greedy, destabilizing men in favor of a coup.

Unexpectedly, the countryside received overwhelming support from urban residents. Public demonstrations in Buenos Aires and other urban areas revealed the complicated manner in which the conflict unfolded. Supposedly these protestors consisted mostly of middle and upper-middle class residents that never supported Cristina’s government. Tens of thousands of Argentines took to the streets in Buenos Aires, Rosario and other cities, banging pots and pans and chanting, “We are with the

⁵ Alexei Barrionuevo, “Argentine President Seeks to Quell Criticism,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2008.

farmers!”⁶ The protests were met by the President’s supporters, consisting mostly of underemployed supporters from the lower classes, and some violent clashes between the two groups ensued. These demonstrations of solidarity reveal a shade of the urban-rural relationship that can’t be sufficiently addressed through the simplified dichotomies mentioned above. The use of these binary models doesn’t allow a discussion of where they overlap.

The fervor of the city dwellers reveals underlying tensions that transcend urban-rural antagonism. These protestors were not happy with the direction of their country and used the growers’ complaints against the government as an opportunity to voice their discontent. Class conflicts emerged during the confrontations between the rival protestors. Taxation and government interference are sensitive issues in a country with a history of corruption, inefficiency, economic instability, and increasing social stratification.

Unfortunately, issues that are quite relevant to Argentina’s future as a nation often received secondary attention to the drama of the conflict. Argentina’s increased soy production has elevated it to nearly mono-crop status, raising concerns about dependency on inconsistent foreign markets. Soy has gradually been replacing other crops in the fields that make up the basic argentine diet, although soy consumption remains comparatively low in the country. Unless grown using the method of *siembra directa*, a sowing technique, soy is notably detrimental to the soil, depleting nutrients at an alarming rate. High levels of technological investment, expensive fertilizers, and larger plots of land are necessary to compete in the Argentine rural landscape of today. These

⁶ Ibid.

circumstances have drawn in foreign capital and expelled small and medium producers. What remains, in effect, is a campo without rural workers, where industry and multinational agribusinesses control resources and revenues. Rather than focus on protecting the small and medium producers, Fernandez de Kirchner isolated them, as we shall see later.

Despite several attempts at negotiation, the roadblocks continued on and off until June 9th, 2008, when the growers entered into informal talks with the government. Harsh words and bitter televised feuds between the growers and the government destabilized the country and brought into question the fragile institutional legitimacy of Argentine politics. Many farmers were skeptical that Congress would act independently. “We want the project debated in Congress, not just ratified,” said Mario Llabias, head of Rural Confederations of Argentina.⁷ The president grudgingly allowed the senate to deliberate “Resolución 125”, which was eventually rejected in favor of the farmers.⁸ She approved the deliberations in the midst of plummeting popularity ratings and decreased national revenues. Nonetheless, the tension continues, as prices for grains fell this summer and a severe drought afflicted the growers. Protests and confrontations resumed in October over stagnation in the discussions. The strike affected the Argentine economy, slowing growth, reducing internal consumption, and resulting in an estimated US\$664 million

⁷ Alexei Barrionuevo, “Argentina Export Tax Sets Off Political Furor” *The New York Times*, July 5, 2008.

⁸ Deliberations on the bill extended into the early hours of July 17, 2008, when the tie was broken by Fernandez’s Vice President, Julio Cobos, further deteriorating her legitimacy and adding another political dimension to the conflict. Before the second vote, Cobos remarked that “Obviamente el consenso no está presente, está el país partido”, For further discussion of this event, see “Crisis política tras el sorpresivo voto del vicepresidente Cobos contra las retenciones móviles kirchneristas,” *Clarín*, July 16, 2008.

loss in possible export revenues.⁹ Both sides continue to circulate the blame, prolonging the bitter rivalry and eroding the effectiveness of dialogue. In addition, it has had a rattling effect on the population, already weary after the 2001 economic meltdown.

The conflict between the government and the growers ballooned into a national debate, involving different parties who aligned themselves with their chosen side for one reason or another. What began as a fiscal dispute erupted into an ideological debate that opened old wounds. Despite the apparent duality of the conflict, it served as a platform from which multiple national issues were discussed, including redistribution of wealth, women in politics, and the use of natural resources. This, however, did not prevent the media and other outlets of expression from sensationalizing and oversimplifying the issue.

Confrontations and Simplifications: The Prevalence of the Dichotomies in the Rhetoric during the Conflict

What began as a dispute over economic measures soon evolved into an ideological debate over the future, and the past, of the nation. According to the president of the Rural Society of Rosario, Jorge Guido Uglolini, a conflict that originated as “una cuestión de plata” quickly revealed a series of civil demands that the government has long neglected in order to maintain authoritarian and hegemonic control over money and power.¹⁰ The government, associated with Buenos Aires and the metropolis, positioned itself against the campo, which embodied the rural interior of Argentina. Old tensions

⁹ Javier Rodríguez Petersen, “Campo y Gobierno: cruces por US\$ 664 millones perdidos,” *Clarín*, November 12, 2008.

¹⁰ Uglolini, Jorge Guido. “A la renta extraordinaria, Argentina Salud!” *Marca Líquida Agropecuaria*. 2008.

and arguments surfaced, bringing into question the relationship between the city and the countryside.

One simplification of the conflict was the fact that if one wasn't with the campo, one was against it, dismissing possible intersections and intricacies of opinion. Neither side represents or protects the small and medium sized producers. The overarching term "campo" itself is debatable, as it refers to a heterogeneous group whose members are affected differently by agricultural policies. Argentina's rural sector is dominated by large landowners (*terratenientes*) and multinational corporations that have enjoyed the concentration of land and capital in the last several decades. The intensification of land concentration and foreign investment was supported by neoliberal economic policies of the 1990's, which contrast with the interventionist and protectionist policies of Fernandez de Kirchner's administration. This concentration has expelled small and medium sized producers, often referred to as *chacareros*, from the countryside at an alarming rate, as they cannot compete with the intensified technological incorporation. Rather than support these struggling small- and medium-sized productions, Fernandez alienated and angered them, thus driving them to unite with representatives of the *terratenientes* and the multinationals.¹¹

According to Carlos A. Vicente, the dispute against the government has actually united an otherwise fractured countryside simply because it gave them a common enemy. The small producers only recently aligned themselves with the *terratenientes* (large landowners) and members of the agribusiness community who have long oppressed

¹¹ For further discussion see Guillermo Neiman and Mario Lattuada's *El campo argentino. Crecimiento con exclusión*, Ediciones Capital Intelectual. Buenos Aires 2005.

them.¹² By resorting to simplified definitions of rurality, the conflict has bypassed the issue of the disappearance of small and medium productions. Some, such as historian Hilda Sabato, are wary of the effects of the polarization between the city and the campo because they tend to reduce plural conceptions to two antagonistic poles-“he who isn’t with me is against me”- which can lead to grave consequences.¹³ These effects ranged from a lack of dialogue to violent clashes that destabilize an already fragile institutional structure.

The city residents who aligned themselves with the campo are also guilty of reducing the growers to stereotypes. The romanticized image of the hardworking *chacarero* or the earnest *gaucho* that many urban dwellers hold of the people of the campo does not sufficiently define the Argentine countryside. According to Roque Planas, writing for *World Politics Review*, “Farmers enjoy wide popularity among Argentinean city dwellers, who idealize them as representatives of a more authentically rustic, Argentinean society that urban politicians don’t seem to understand.”¹⁴ This perception of the authenticity of rural Argentina and its importance in the preservation of national identity is a notion that is perpetuated by Argentine literary tradition, especially of the twentieth century, as we shall see later. This notion does not incorporate the foreign owned agribusinesses that are gradually taking over Argentine agricultural

¹² Carlos A. Vicente, “El Síndrome de Estocolmo,” *Página 12*, June 24, 2008, El País.

¹³ Gabriela Vulcano, “De dónde viene tanta bronca?” *Diario Crítica de la Argentina*, June 26, 2008.

¹⁴ Roque Planas, “Argentine Farmers Resume Protest with a Six-Day Strike,” *World Politics Review*, October 8, 2008.

production. Both the supporters and the opponents of the growers engage in an oversimplification of the rural landscape that disguises its many variations.

Perhaps the most common complaint that positioned urban versus rural was that the central government was draining the riches from the interior to support the monstrous capital, Buenos Aires. A 2008 interview with Mario Llambias, head of the Argentine Rural Confederation, stated that the national government is hindering the development of the interior and losing an opportunity to increase the riches of the entire nation. He continues to say that what began as a protest by the campo grew to become a protest by the interior against the hegemony of Buenos Aires.¹⁵ In the same interview, an unidentified grower vents his anger that the government wasn't satisfied with taking 35 percent from their pockets to feed "*la ciudad*" (the city). Meanwhile, the man complains, the taxes are not proportionately distributed in the interior and the rural departments don't benefit from any redistributive scheme.

Others viewed the conflict as a resurrection of the battle between *Unitarios* and *Federales*, the two warring political parties from nineteenth century Argentina that defended a centralized or federalized government, respectively. Although the Federales eventually won, the sense that federalism was simply an arrangement made on paper prevails today. According to this view, the dominance of Buenos Aires in politics and commerce exposes the centralized character of the nation. Martín Santiváñez, writing an opinion column in *La Nación*, claims that the conflict "desnuda uno de los estigmas argentinos por antonomasia, el enfrentamiento soterrado entre el campo y la ciudad."¹⁶ He describes the rural interior's battle for greater autonomy as a pertinent, postponed, and

¹⁵ *Hombres del Campo*, Pampa Nuestra Video, San Telmo, Argentina, 2008.

¹⁶ Santiváñez, Martín. "Argentina, el campo y la ciudad," *La Nación*, July 20, 2008.

inconclusive dispute. According to Santiváñez, the old caudillos, now under the label of the rural federations, have united to contest porteño (a term used to refer to dwellers of the port city of Buenos Aires) centralism. In his article “El federalismo en retroceso”, Jorge de la Rúa, former minister of Justice and Human Rights of the Nation, claims that every Argentine knows that the political system omits its federal character, which goes back to the period of the nation’s independence. He is of the opinion that those who control the nation (the central government) have taken advantage of the poverty and precarious situation of the interior provinces. De la Rúa complains that “este mecanismo de caja centralizada, en un sistema justicialista, depende exclusivamente del presidente de la Nación.”¹⁷ Not only are the growers upset that the power is centralized in the capital, but at that it is solely in the hands of the president. Ugolini, aforementioned president of the Rural Society of Rosario, is critical of the nominal division of power and a federalism that is recited but not practiced. According to Ugolini, this scheme transfers the resources from the interior to the capital, which leads to the continuous and permanent exhaust of the provinces.¹⁸ The recurrence of themes from the nineteenth century demonstrates the prevailing bitterness and irresolution that keeps a dated dichotomy fresh.

The confrontation caused an eruption of frustration among those living in the interior. In an opinion article from the newspaper *La Voz del Interior*, a newspaper from the province Córdoba, Adrián Simoni claims that urban Argentina considers it unacceptable that the campo wishes to become rich. He voices a common complaint that

¹⁷ Jorge de la Rúa, “El federalismo, en retroceso,” *La Nación*, August 21, 2008.

¹⁸ Ugolini, “A la renta extraordinaria, Argentina Salud!”

Argentina wants to maintain the countryside in a form of slavery in order to guarantee cheap foodstuffs for the population and cede to the cities the majority of the profits they receive from external markets. In his eyes, these profits only go to urban bureaucrats who overcharge for their questionable services and subsidize poorly made industrial products. He argues that the capital city benefits from the wealth of the countryside, financing mansions in rich porteño neighborhoods, while the campo doesn't see even one improvement on their decrepit roads. Simoni believes that "La región central del país tiene una oportunidad de alterar el 'orden natural' de las cosas por el que el Gran Buenos Aires le succionó históricamente su riqueza." His editorial demonstrates the dissatisfaction that has mounted over decades of those from the interior who feel themselves overshadowed by Buenos Aires.¹⁹

An article in *Clarín*, one of Argentina's main national newspapers, articulates similar feelings:

Es evidente que la extracción de recursos mediante este mecanismo fiscal es visualizada como una transferencia creciente hacia el Gobierno central...Ello genera una contradicción interior/Gobierno central que supera al tradicional enfrentamiento ciudad/campo.²⁰

Although, according to the article, the contradiction has shifted to interior/Government, it is a current embodiment of the traditional confrontation between city/countryside. Rosana Guber, writing about rural migrants who settled in Buenos Aires, elaborates on the notion that the poverty of the campo was the product of the wealth of the cities.

¹⁹ Adrián Simioni, "Prohibido ser 'rico' en Laboulaye," *La Voz del Interior*, March 19, 2008, Córdoba, Argentina.

²⁰ Osvaldo Barsky, "Cómo se puede destrabar el conflicto con el campo," *El Clarín*, March 31, 2008.

According to Guber, the condition of the poor rural migrants didn't result from their attachment to dated traditions, but rather from inequality and exploitation of the interior.²¹

Yet another theme that emerged during the conflict that attempted to distinguish the agricultural countryside from the industrialized city is the argument that the government, hence the nation, have a right to share the benefits when agriculture profits because agricultural production is unlike any other business. This argument claims that the benefits from the profit of the soil serve as a type of monopoly since it isn't due to greater investment nor effort but rather natural conditions.²² Thus, the incredible profits were not legitimately obtained; rather nature provided them to the farmers. This attitude aggravated many growers, who argue that they have spent good money investing in technology and have worked hard in the fields.²³

Thus, despite significant transformations and modernization of agriculture in Argentina, there still exist traditional attitudes concerning rural Argentina and its place in the nation. The distinctions between city and campo are no longer easily made, as actors, products, and capital flow between the two. Many landowners and producers now live in the city and manage their plots from afar. Protests erupted in Buenos Aires of urban dwellers who supported the growers rather than the government. Nonetheless, the rural urban division continues to appear in national culture and politics.

²¹ Rosana Guber, "El 'Cabecita Negra' o las categorías de la investigación etnográfica en la Argentina," *Revista de Investigaciones Folclóricas* 14 (1999), 115.

²² Miguel Teubal, "Debate sobre la renta de la tierra," *Página12*, Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 24, 2008.

²³ Trucco, Victor, "Lo que tenemos para decir en la FAO en 2008," Extract from a conference given at the XII Congreso de AAPRESID "La hora del Empowerment", en 2004.

The clash between the interior and the capital can also be seen in popular medium such as music lyrics. The song “Punto Argentino” by Andrés Calamaro, released in 2006 and used as background music to several videos covering the conflict, highlights these differences: “Si soy del interior, no estoy adentro/ qué futuro me espera, si gobiernan desde afuera?/ en la capital combatiendo el capital” (If I’m from the interior, I’m not on the inside/ what future awaits me, if they govern from outside?/ In the capital, fighting against capital) and continues “Somos los argentinos en tercera persona,/ será que estamos en la loma, que nos quieren boxear” (We are the Argentines in third person/ because we are in the hills, they want to box us). “Qué queda para los demás?, de la parte de atrás/ Somos los argentinos los que nunca vinimos” (What remains for the rest?/, those from behind/ We are the Argentines, those who never came). The lyrics clearly demonstrate a rural resentment towards a country that establishes itself on one city. Calamaro is purposely emitting a political and social message, but as has been seen, it is a message shared by many.

The Rural/Urban Dichotomy: Between History and Literary Tradition

The origins of this confrontation trace back to nineteenth century state-formation and ideas such as those outlined in Domingo F. Sarmiento’s novel *Facundo*, published in 1845, in which the author conceives of Argentina’s early history as an ongoing battle between the forces of civilization and barbarity. The exaggerated influence of texts such as *Facundo* is perhaps due to the complex relationship between literature and politics in Latin America. Literature was produced by many authors as means to interpret the present and understand the past. In nineteenth century Argentina, fictional literary

discussion mixed with politics and thus blurred the line between imagination and history. “Authors of such visions in the nineteenth century, like Sarmiento and Mitre, were writers as well as policy makers. The ideas they expounded on in their writings were closely linked to state projects and informed or were informed by dominant ideologies.”²⁴ The ideas proposed in *Facundo* and other texts were meant to be used as tools in nation building and not simply intended for literary enjoyment. In these texts, the discussion of rurality and urbanity was not only fictionalized, but was also used to demonstrate social-historic hypotheses.²⁵

The dichotomy of interior versus the capital has a long, intertwined history in Argentine culture and politics. At the time of Argentine independence, Buenos Aires was viewed as a lonely outpost of advanced European civilization on the outer limit of the vast, wild interior. The interior of the nation in this perspective was a desolate and untamed wilderness, dotted with indigenous settlements and the occasional gaucho (the Argentine counterpart to the North American cowboy). This wilderness and its confrontation with the relatively modernized city of Buenos Aires was the motivation behind Sarmiento’s *Facundo*.

Facundo, the main character, represented the brutal caudillo from the interior, who comes to dominate politics in the capital but whose barbaric ways clashed with the culture and civilization of the city. Sarmiento argues that in order for the nation to survive and progress (as he sees it), civilization and its urban environs must conquer

²⁴ William Acree, “Tracing the Ideological Line: Philosophies of the Argentine Nation from Sarmiento to Martínez Estrada,” *A Contracorriente* 1:1 (Fall 2003) 130.

²⁵ Graciela Montoldo, *De pronto, el campo. Literatura argentina y tradición rural*. (Rosario: Viterbo, 1993), 20.

barbarity and its untamed sources. The irony of the application of these dichotomies in the present conflict is that the Argentine countryside is relatively modernized, in which state-of-the-art agricultural technologies have basically industrialized the *campo*. The image of an untamed wilderness no longer applies, as producers replace the gaucho and the brush with tractors and genetically modified soybeans.

Although *Facundo* is a fictional work based on the real-life character of Juan Manuel de Rosas, a nineteenth century Argentine dictator, Sarmiento's identification and elaboration of this basic dichotomy would have real implications for Argentine national identity. As stated by William Acree in his essay "Tracing the Ideological Line: Philosophies of the Argentine Nation from Sarmiento to Martínez Estrada," Sarmiento and other Argentine authors

...deal with the 'essence': what and who makes 'our' nation; how do we define our national values and on what do we base them; how do these things participate in the construction of our national identity, and so on... These "literary" considerations shape ideologies and attitudes, and thus have real, tangible consequences for the lives of those who make up the Argentine national community.²⁶

Acree points out the lasting effect that works such as *Facundo* have had in Argentine society. The literature of the early republic served as a guide for national identity, and remains embedded in national discourse. Thus the battle between civilization and barbarity, between progress and stagnation, was interpreted as one of national importance, taken to the extreme in the prolonged conflict between *Federales* and *Unitarios*. These two political groups represented competing ideologies; the Federales, characterized by caudillos and backed by gauchos from the interior, demanded provincial autonomy under a federalized system, while the Unitarios, depicted as liberal and cosmopolitan, fought for

²⁶ Acree, "Tracing the Ideological Line...", 130.

a government centralized in Buenos Aires. Argentine early history is often depicted as a succession of battles between the federal project of the provinces, and the triumphant centralist project of the port-city of Buenos Aires. In the present conflict, the actors and the media bring these old distinctions to the surface, altering them to meet current conditions.

Despite the victory of the Federales, the hegemony of Buenos Aires was already firmly established by the time the city was federalized in 1880. The tension between the rural growers and the federal government extends back to the nineteenth century, when the nation, and especially the port city of Buenos Aires, benefitted from the agricultural revolution that swept the Pampas. During the second half of the century, the vast stretch of fertile land known as the Pampas, comparable to the Midwest of the United States, was occupied by a wave of immigrants from Europe. The agricultural growth in the Pampas fueled the dramatic growth of the port city of Buenos Aires, as foreign investment poured in. The city had a monopoly on access to the ports, so almost any goods passing in or out of the country must have first passed through *capital federal*. Producers in the Pampas were integrated into the world market, and, like today, were resentful of the fact that they must first pass through Buenos Aires' political machine before reaping their profits.²⁷ Processing plants were set up around the capital, and a network of railroads was constructed extending from Buenos Aires to the interior, securing the subservience and dependency of the interior region. Similar to the complaints in the present conflict

²⁷ Victoria Cohen Imach, *De Utopias y Desencantos: Campo intelectual y periferia en la Argentina de los sesenta* (Tucumán: Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 1992), 59.

between the interior provinces and the national government, many objected to the size of Buenos Aires' budget compared with that assigned to provincial governments.²⁸

Instead of allowing space for both the urban and the rural, for the modern and traditional, the struggle for identity revolved around a script that antagonized two. National identity *became* the struggle between the Interior and the capital. Since the nation was founded on an exclusive, rather than inclusive order, Argentina continues to struggle with consolidating national unity.²⁹ This lack of unity undermined Buenos Aires' dominance, as it represented "central authority and national spirit with little integration of the parts" which "failed to build consensus or community."³⁰ According to James R. Scobie, author of the book "Argentina: A City and a Nation", investments, government expenditures, and intellectual opportunities distinguished between two Argentinas-Buenos Aires and the Interior.³¹ The title of his book demonstrates the perception of the dual character of Argentina and his historical narrative reveals the political and economic decisions that further perpetuated the dichotomies.

The dichotomy proposed so many years ago by Sarmiento continues to haunt modern Argentina. Despite the efforts of historical revisionists to reread the novel, Argentines cannot escape the legacy of Sarmiento's text. The civilization-barbarity dichotomy plagues national politics and continues to emerge in popular discourse. To this day, Argentines argue passionately about the value of the book: "To some, it is a necessary call to join the

²⁸ Guber, "El 'Cabecita Negra'," 118.

²⁹ Imach, *De Utopias y Desencantos: Campo intelectual y periferia en la Argentina de los sesenta*, 51.

³⁰ James R. Scobie, *Argentina: A City and a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 209,219.

³¹ *Ibid.* 124.

developed world and draw from European civilization... To others, it contributed to the insidious discourse on national inferiority...”³² The text of one of Argentina’s founding fathers resonates deeply in modern Argentina, penetrating to the core of national identity. According to Imach, other polarities, such as interior-exterior, emerged from the dichotomy civilization-barbarity and were used to give order to modern national culture.³³

The Rural-Urban Dichotomy in Modern Literature: Perpetuation and Continuation

Although in many ways Argentine society of 2008 is vastly different from the budding nation that struggled to find itself after independence, the distinction emerges time and again which reinforces the perception of two Argentinas. In her observation of the conflict between the government and the agriculturalists, Dr. Alicia Doncel elaborates on Santiago Kovadlov’s theory that the problem in Argentina is that current problems are addressed using terminology of the past. She elaborates on the ideas of Kovadlov by claiming that old themes reemerge, as ghostly apparitions, in current conflicts. She asks, might this ghost be “Facundo, quién nos sigue mirando sin que podamos devolverle la mirada?” Dr. Doncel believes that Argentines have inherited, in a broad sense of the term, the fundamental dichotomy of civilization/barbarity. This division has undergone several variations and adapted to the circumstances of particular historical contexts, from the divisions of unitarios/federales, to campo/ciudad or countryside/government.³⁴

³² Diana Sorensen Goodrich, *Facundo and the Construction of Argentine Culture*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.) 1

³³ Imach, *De Utopias y Desencantos: Campo intelectual y periferia en la Argentina de los sesenta*, 138.

³⁴ Doncel, Dr. Alicia Beatriz, “Un Antiguo Grafo del Futuro: La Televisión,” (Presented at the 10º Congreso Redcom, Universidad Católica de Salta, Salta: September 2008),

Modern Argentine literature is still trying to give form to many questions of its tradition and its past, including the tension that exists between rural and urban spheres. Twentieth century authors have oscillated between attempts to incorporate or maintain separate Argentina's rural and urban worlds.³⁵ Rural life was interpreted as incomplete modernity and viewed as a "problem" that must be addressed. The early twentieth century saw the resurrection of the gauchesque genre, popularized in the late nineteenth century by José Hernández's epic poem *Martin Fierro*. This revival romanticized the once persecuted figure of the gaucho, who went from being the backward fiend of the Pampa to the solitary and mysterious keeper of authentic Argentine culture. Nativism prompted a rereading of the role of rural Argentina, from a space that degraded the nation to the true keeper and representative of national identity. Imbedded in the ongoing discussion are differing interpretations of the national character of Argentina. One view held that the europeanized capital opposed the "true" national spirit of the interior. In this view, the cosmopolitan forces of Buenos Aires threatened the tradition and essence of Argentina. Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, in his book, *Radiografía de la Pampa* (1933), argues that Argentina's problems are rooted in its acceptance of Sarmiento's essentially false dichotomy, claiming that it fails to recognize that civilization and barbarism are inseparable.³⁶ In order to progress, Argentina needed to accept and harmonize her different parts.

³⁵ Graciela Montoldo, *De pronto, el campo. Literatura argentina y tradición rural*. (Rosario: Viterbo, 1993), 15.

³⁶ Acree, "Tracing the Ideological Line..." 124-125.

According to Imach, the polarity of center-periphery, Buenos Aires-interior is one of the most significant and decisive indices of Argentine social conscience.³⁷ It became an almost natural way to analyze continental and national reality. Although some authors, such as Martínez Estrada, contested the relevance of the dichotomy, none have been able to find a solution to Sarmiento's dualism.

Rural-urban migration throughout the twentieth century complicated the application of this divisive model, yet it was adapted to the circumstances and survived the transformation. The migrants in the big city made the people and situation of the provinces more visible. In many ways this migrant was rejected by porteños; they were labeled *cabecitas negras*, a derogatory term that refers to the darker appearance of many of the migrants. Many ended up in *villas miserias*, marginalized neighborhoods where social services rarely reached. During the Perón years, the newly settled migrants were often associated with the peronist masses. An excerpt from Martínez Estrada's essay *Qué es esto?* reveals the deep resentment felt towards the new migrants when he relates them to Rosas' followers: "Aquellos siniestros demonios de la llanura, que Sarmiento describió en el *Facundo*, no habían perecido." The same author who discounted Sarmiento's dichotomies relies on them later when he describes Perón as a modern-day caudillo and equates his followers with Facundo's unruly supporters from the plains. Although he discounts Sarmiento in one regard, in the end he cannot ignore him.³⁸

Twentieth century authors inherited a simplified framework for interpreting their nation. Although the basic division of civilization/barbarity was manipulated,

³⁷ Imach, *De Utopias y Desencantos: Campo intelectual y periferia en la Argentina de los sesenta*, 57.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

discounted, or reinforced, it was never escaped. Authors continue to grapple with a national identity that relies on the division of rural and urban spheres.

Conclusion: Between Rhetoric and Conflict

The ties between the rhetoric surrounding the current growers strike and conflicts of the past reveal a pattern of oversimplification and reliance on divisive terms. The separation of the quarrel into two antagonistic sides effectively diminishes the possibility for dialogue and erodes the already fragile institutional legitimacy of the nation. Rather than promote mutual, productive dialogue, both sides (the government and the growers) encouraged passionate and public manifestations which tended to lead to violence. Class tensions between city dwellers were thinly veiled behind the banners of “Apoyo el Gobierno” (I support the Government) or “Estoy con el Campo.” El campo and la ciudad are no longer so easily distinguished, nor should they be. Rural and isolation and exclusion are no longer necessary conditions. Rather than continue an unfruitful internal battle, Argentina would benefit from unity to control foreign investment and protect its soils. The dichotomies of rural and urban, an oversimplification during Sarmiento’s time, are no more useful today. If Argentina can shed the molds of its divisive past, it will be much more equipped to deal with complex problems and progress in the future rather than sallow in the past.

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