Republic, Nation and Democracy:
The Challenge of Diversity

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We can begin by recognizing that today, on the national as well as the world stage, dealing with cultural diversity is calling into question modern political concepts like republic, nation or democracy. It is forcing us to redefine them. The phenomenon of population movements, the demand for recognition of indigenous people's rights, especially in some Latin American countries, or the conflicts arising from claims to regions' right to life and identity – as in the case of the town of Gualeguaychú in Argentina – all these challenge the logic of the nation state and its sovereignty as well as the republican principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. To borrow Etienne Balibar's phrase, these issues push back the frontiers of democracy.

Secondly we can say, in Argentina's case, that it is a republic, as its constitution states, but that it has not always been republican. We talk about a 'possible republic',[1] a conservative republic, a limited republic, expressions that demonstrate the indeterminacy of the word, which does not allow us to define a single political regime and system of values. Argentina has not always been a republic. First it was a colonial government. Its independence was followed by a long interregnum during which anarchy and tyranny alternated, civil conflicts followed one another and several attempts at a republic failed. After the foundation of the republic in 1853 the discourse of the literate elites continually emphasized its uncompleted nature and the obstacles put in its way by the indigenous population and colonial habits. In the following pages we shall interrogate this ambivalent legacy which jeopardizes an idea of the population's integration that is inseparable from the status of republic.

Republic is not only the name of a nation state and its regime. It is also a model of national integration based on a universalist conception of citizenship and affirming the abstract figure of the person in law, endowed with equal rights and values of civism and civility, the foundation stones of a society arising from a contract. This model of citizenship has been contested from a Marxist standpoint because of the hiatus between legal-political equality and social equality, and also from a liberal

perspective, with Tocqueville's warning as to the risks associated with the egalitarian will of democratic populations. Today the emergence of diversity raises questions about the very principles of a universalist integration.

Indeed I think the issue of diversity in its different guises – the foreigner, the immigrant, the refugee, but also the sexually diverse – leads us to problematize the spectrum of political ideas ranging from nation to democracy via republic. But dealing with the issue of diversity in connection with republic, nation and democracy means immediately introducing the political question into a topic that is generally approached from a cultural perspective. The declaration on cultural diversity adopted by the UNESCO General Conference on 2 November 2001 had the objective of going deeper into 'the debate on issues relating to cultural diversity, particularly those associated with development' and 'making progress with defining principles, norms and practices, at both the international and the national level'. Since then the topic has been firing an interdisciplinary debate because it is itself cross-disciplinary and implies recognition of diversity however it is expressed: questioning the abstract universalism of rights which had dominated the world order, demand for equity in the development process, interrogation of the meaning of national and international community with regard to a diversified society, thinking on changes taking place and democracy as the perpetually redefined frontier of a possible human order. In this problematic context we shall tackle three specific issues.

How far did the representation of the republic at the time of its foundation include a standardizing vision of diversity?

In South America a republic became the norm over most of the continent after the colonial connection was broken. Unlike Brazil, a Portuguese colony which retained the monarchy after its independence up until 1889, the end of the colonial system in Spanish-speaking America came about under the influence of the great revolutions in North America and France and in an intellectual context where the republic seemed something different from just one political regime among many others. It represented the system that was destined to realize on earth humanity's greatest aspirations. The need to restore political order after independence from Spain meant not only replacing a political regime that had become irrelevant but also building a nation on the former territory of the vice-royalty. It was in the context of this nation-building – in its imaginative dimension – that the republic seemed to be a 'historical self-understanding' of the process taking place in Latin America and the political identities then being formed.

At that moment there took shape, in the discourse of literate Argentine elites, a representation of America's place in the general process of civilization, where construction of the republic was conceived as a means of taking part in that stage of human evolution. This representation formed an image of the colonial past and the republic's future which was based on a philosophy of history emanating from the Enlightenment; it also involved marking the revolution in South America as an inevitable moment of progress for humanity. The nation emerged from the revolution and, like all revolutions, it claimed to be a new beginning, breaking radically with what had gone before.

Enlightened elites interpreted the vicissitudes of the Spanish American revolution in terms that reveal the feelings of those leaders, who, despite their adoption of the

republican sentiments of equality and political freedom, saw the 'real people' as an obstacle to their objectives. Their discourse demonstrates the gap and at the same time justifies their role in the political government of the country. The opposition between 'civilization' and 'barbarism', which supplies the title for the famous book by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1990) on the Argentine nation before constitutional organization, introduced an opposition between two worlds that met in the revolution. The first version of that pair of opposites appeared in the colonial world, divided into two societies: on one hand the provincial towns, 'the centre of Argentine, Spanish and European civilization', which Sarmiento describes as 'islands floating on the sea of the pampa'; on the other the countryside, the site of a way of life he compares with barbarism. In the towns the elements peculiar to civilized people were to be found: schools, shops, law-courts, workshops. Beyond them the countryside stretched away, an empty space – a place of infinity, solitude, danger – where another form of life was lived, 'American, almost native': the 'pseudo-social' life of the gaucho, who wore different clothes and had different needs. 'They seem to be two separate societies' – wrote Sarmiento (1990: 49) – 'two peoples alien to one another' coexisting without meeting.[2]

So, from the viewpoint of humanity's progress, the republic represented a task to be carried out. We find it first in the programmes, proclamations and narratives which provided content for that as yet unrealized ideal. Convinced of their legitimacy, the ruling groups attempted to supply the means to achieve it: modernization of the country, education and a central role for immigration as a 'direct contribution' of new habits, new outlooks that would help to close the gap between the citizen – sovereign subject of the political pact – and the possible (or impossible) citizen, the 'other', who did not accept modernizing political ideas or remained on the sidelines.

How did the legacy of this representation bring about an 'ambivalence' over time between, on one hand, a universalist wish to take part as a people in the political and cultural progress of humanity and, on the other, the reality of an exclusive democracy that valued one culture over others?

The opposition between civilization and barbarism is a vision with serious consequences for the historical and political construction of the republic. It expresses first the opposition between an abstract ideal of citizenship and political order and the reality of the ordinary people, seen by the elites as alien or an obstacle to that project. This is why, in nation-building projects in Spanish America, the question is constantly raised about the way that citizen subject might be constructed, given that political will continually comes up against the absence of a social base capable of adapting to the modern political order. Whether in the discourse of politicians or in philosophical analysis, building and perpetuating the republic were constantly described as uncompleted and facing the risk of disorder, and the people's actions seen as an expression of 'Latin-American evils' that would have to be transcended. José Ingenieros (1957: 71), a positivist philosopher and public figure, comments on Alberdi's sociological theories as follows: 'The Republic was not in fact a reality in South America because the people were not ready to govern themselves by that system, which was beyond their capabilities.'

The political model, which focused on elites, gave raise to paternalistic practices in political action and a limited citizenship which had a marked effect on the coun-

try's political history. At the same time national unity was seen as a process of cultural standardization rather than an acknowledgement of the diversity of cultures making up the nation's social base. The integration of this founding project into institutions, laws and practices was thus marked by tension, ambiguities and the marginalization of minority cultures:

1. The narrative of national identity was constructed on the model of the 'melting-pot', which was used to incorporate the foreigners who arrived en masse in the country in the early 20th century. Indeed the founding elite's national project conceived of immigration as a civilizing instrument and saw the integration of foreigners into the nation as one of its basic pillars. The ideal foreigner imagined by that project was described in a group of features such as development of industry, commitment to work, civility and morality, which it was hoped would be incorporated into the indigenous culture. 'Foreignness', understood here as an unassimilable difference, was represented by the Indian and the barbarian, a product of racial mixing, who were seen as obstacles to progress towards civilization (Villavicencio, 2003).

On this model a national language was formed that was open to the influences of European languages, the bearers of civilization, and closed to the purism of the colonial language, which was seen as a remnant from the past. The definition of a national language that was to reflect the turns of phrase peculiar to America was based around teaching of spelling and grammar, a truly political field of definition, closely linked to the institution of popular education. But this policy also had the effect of promoting one language over other existing languages, which were reduced to silence or dismissed as minority dialects to be used only in the private sphere and with no public status.

2. The republic considered national integration as connected with territory. Thus, alongside definition of the political order, a process of territorial definition was begun. Formation of the nation state assumed rule over a demarcated territory, so its consolidation required control by state institutions over the whole territory (Quijada, 2000). Therefore state unity reorganized national territory by establishing external and internal borders and herding indigenous peoples into reserves or expropriating their land.

3. Public, secular, compulsory education is also a legacy of this model. It represents on the one hand the wish to bring the people out of ignorance, set up egalitarian conditions and prepare conditions for exercising political rights, but on the other hand it was also a way of reproducing the paternalistic relationship with the other, the different. In 1864 Sarmiento wrote, about the education of the people in the republic: 'Our government will be, because this is the final result of human consciousness, representative, without privileged families, chosen by popular election, with free discussion in the press and all the other principles that constitute Sovereignty of the People [. . .]. But since the sovereign people lack complete understanding of the principles so proclaimed and of the development of reason, these principles are hard to translate into reality; and yet we must be republican and free, even if we were to have bloody hands for a century from using such a delicate and dangerous mechanism.'[3] In a way citizenship formation reproduced in the political arena this educational model which starts from inequality between pupil and teacher and assumes a distance, a waiting period, a delay in the people exercising their

rights, and because of this only some individuals appear capable of directing the destiny of the nation.

Nowadays in Argentina, and also in other Latin American countries, the nation's power combines ill with regional integrations and the idea of Latin American identity ignoring the diversity of cultures. A considerable effect of this ambivalent legacy in Argentina has been to make ethnic differences invisible (no trace of a black presence, sparseness of indigenous peoples), since the standardization discourse says that 'Argentines landed from ships', or affirms the idea of an 'Argentine exception' among Latin American countries. During the economic crisis that afflicted the country in 2001 the theme of a 'Latin-Americanization' of Argentina demonstrated this feeling of difference in a people that sees itself as coming from origins which are diverse, it is true, but always European. This is becoming especially clear today given the discrimination affecting the populations of some border regions, who bear the stigma of their ethnic origin. Peruvians and Bolivians are on the bottom rung of this ethnic differentiation in Argentina (Grimson, 2006: 71).

We come to our final point: *At a time of globalization how does the civilization-barbarism duo move about South America and how does it affect the way Latin Americans see the great challenges presented by the future of democracy, recognition of the plurality of cultural allegiances, the issue of equality and reconstitution of the public space or the political subjectivization which is still subject to revision?*

Though the problem of identity has been a constant in Latin American thought, from the 1990s the topic became a central one and has been approached from various theoretical perspectives with the common concern being to do away with binary views of culture and uniform representations of the continent. Several authors emphasize the transition from an 'invisible' diversity to a 'hyper-visibility' of differences over recent decades in several Latin American countries (Grimson, 2006; García Canclini, 2001; Dobrée, 2007). This process has positive aspects, such as indigenous groups getting organized and claiming rights, identities being revalued through diversity in ways of life, the global context of the debate around recognition and multicultural policies introduced in a number of countries. The dual paradigm (civilization-barbarism) which had characterized representations of Latin American identity has gradually given way to interpretations that have accepted the diversity of subjects, processes and temporalities coexisting in the same space.

This process is running alongside the advance of democracy on the continent and the destabilization of essentialist ideas about national identity or what is 'Latin American', which nationalist projects saw as a given for integration mechanisms. At the same time expansion of the media, which have encouraged formation of social imaginaries, has meant that representations of sectors on the margins of official spaces and excluded groups have been made visible. Finally recognition of new subjects standing outside the logic and temporality of western reason has been the result both of affirmative actions undertaken by concrete groups and of conceptual categories developed by academic institutions, social organizations and international agencies, which have made their practices coherent and begun to include them in their development programmes.

And so, in the 1990s, various groups – some of them longstanding but hitherto reduced to silence, others new – gradually made clear the extreme variety of ways of

organizing the meaning of reality, thus shattering the imagining of a uniform social whole or pre-established harmonies between the various groups coexisting on the ground. Over the same period several constitutional reforms made it possible to incorporate multiculturalism into the law and policies of the state, so bringing about an improved understanding of the political issues associated with cultural diversity.

However, the socio-economic context of globalization in which the continent's new democracies took their place has had some effects on the fractures that threaten national integration since states have lost their capacity for social and political cohesion, handing over their power to supranational actors involved in developing new markets. The economic and social crisis, which compromised our countries' development, and still does so today, increases social fragmentation and deepens social inequalities. The issue of cultural diversity is thus shot through by a xenophobic refrain which turns the immigrant into the scapegoat for the destructive effects of the crisis. Though the foreigner has always been a complex figure, the mounting wave of migrant populations crossing the borders each day in search of better living conditions has exacerbated xenophobia and hostility to foreigners.

Under the banner of the one-track discourse of neo-liberalism, in whose name far-reaching, disturbing changes, both economic and social, have been carried out, politics has focused on a model of action adapted to existing social conditions, ignoring the idea of strengthening institutions, which is likely to ensure the sovereignty of the people and their participation via representative mechanisms.

Today the demand for recognition seems to assume resistance to this single model. There is a request for civility (according to Etienne Balibar, 2001: 182, 'by civility we understand a politics which – taking account of the dual sense of friendliness and accord that the word contains – involves actions and words likely to act as a brake on violence') as a reaction to the various forms of incivility that dominate in a world where political concern for what we have in common is being weakened in favour of exploitation of the planet. In a recent study the Brazilian philosopher Gabriel Cohn (2003) establishes a link between politics, a continuous process of building a public order that is never completed and always marked by conflict, and that dialectic of civility that is its last resort when faced with an aggravated and dominant individualism. In Cohn's view the extreme individualism that typifies today's social climate is a form of barbarism through which are expressed relations between humans who have lost the sense of what it is possible and appropriate to do and what it is not, in particular in the form of 'indifference', emptiness and injustice towards both others and oneself.

This request for civility opposed to the 'barbarization' of the Latin American social world has produced political expressions that can be interpreted as forms of resistance to those economic and cultural policies which blur all differences in favour of a homogeneous identity as citizen and consumer (in the case of liberal democracy), or monolithic identities in national unity discourse. For the first time, and in parallel, a woman (a figure from the resistance movement after dictator Pinochet's coup d'état) is governing Chile and a representative of the Aymara community is governing Bolivia. If these unprecedented political configurations turned out to be able to bring about progress in sustainable development and in a process of integration that has reached a historic stage with these events, and given the assumption of

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equality, cultural diversity in Latin America could no longer be withheld from the majority.

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Notes

1. A phrase from Juan Bautista Alberdi, the intellectual and author of the 1853 constitution.
2. The original title of the book, published in Chile in 1845 by El Progreso, was *Civilización i Barbarie. Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga i aspecto físico, costumbres i hábitos de la República Argentina.*
3. Report presented to the plenipotentiary ministers of the Lima American Conference, December 1864 (Sarmiento, 1899: 20).

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