

THE TOP HATS' HOUSE

1880-1912

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The year 1880 was a turning point in Argentine history. With the defeat of governor Carlos Tejedor by the national troops, the federalization of Buenos Aires finally became a reality and its political unity was sealed by the capitulation of the last of the provinces rebelling against the already built national State. The city became the Federal Capital, separate from the province, and the customs office of Buenos Aires—the main source of tax revenue—was handed over to the national government. Thus, one of the most persistent tensions since 1853 came to an end: the dispute between the provinces and the Buenos Aires elite over the control of the port and its revenue.

The period that followed coincided with an unprecedented cycle of economic expansion, marked by the country's full integration into the world market as a producer of agricultural commodities. Thus, the agro-export model was consolidated, based on raising livestock and developing an increasingly technical agriculture that placed the country among those with the highest economic growth worldwide. The meatpacking industry made it possible to export chilled and frozen meats to Europe, especially to Great Britain, a fact which transformed the ranches of the Pampean region into the engine of an outward-oriented economy. Meat, wool and, later on, cereals became symbols of prosperity.

Railways played a central role in this transformation. Financed to a large extent by British capitals, tracks were laid throughout the territory, linking productive regions with ports for export. The expansion of railways, the telegraph and the strong investment of the national State in infrastructure to connect the country with routes and roads not only eased trade but also contributed to homogenize the national territory, shortening distances and connecting populations that had hitherto been isolated.

This growth was accompanied by an unparalleled demographic process. Millions of European immigrants, mainly Italians and Spaniards, arrived at the shores of the Río de la Plata attracted by the promises of fertile land and ample job opportunities. In Buenos Aires and other coastal cities, their arrival profoundly changed the social and cultural landscape. Foreign languages mixed in overcrowded tenements and tango, born in the suburbs, expressed a combination of nostalgia and hope. But tensions also emerged showing the dark side of modernization: overcrowding, poor public health conditions, recurrent epidemics, precarious work and child labor. Economic growth and the resulting wealth did not translate into the development of good living conditions for the population as a whole.

The elites who took over the political leadership of the country after the unification were strongly linked to those activities that were at the heart of the agro-export model: ranchers from the humid Pampean region, traders related to the world market and entrepreneurs in certain industrial sectors which had managed to integrate into the system, such as cotton, sugar, forestry or wine.

As to politics, when Julio Argentino Roca took office as president in 1880, the absolute rule of the Autonomist National Party (PAN, Partido Autonomista Nacional) was sealed. It would govern Argentina for the next three decades supported by restrictive voting rules and fraudulent practices. The result was a regime in which access to institutions was denied to the social majorities, and politics was conceived as the property of a few, reproduced in family circles and reinforced by personal ties of honor and prestige.

In this context, the National Congress acquired an aristocratic nature. Top hats began to crowd the corridors, benches and balconies, becoming an emblem of a time when clothing was evidence of social status. Politics was governed by chivalric codes: the duel was an accepted practice to settle grievances, and there were not a few lawmakers who fought in defense of their honor. The Parliament, in addition to being a place for debate, was where etiquette gestures and rituals took place to reinforce membership to a closed and select group.

However, under this elitist guise, the Congress was also the place where fundamental laws for the construction of the modern state were passed. Rules were discussed and approved defining international and inter-provincial borders, consolidating national sovereignty and ordering territorial expansion. Progress was made for the adoption of secular laws, such as the creation of the Civil Registry, the secularization of marriage and law No. 1420 of common education, which established free, mandatory and secular education. These measures marked a milestone and reorganized the relationship between the state, society and the church, paving the way to modern Argentina. The Congress also accompanied the process of monetary unification and the organization of the banking system, key elements in consolidating an expanding economy. The first steps were also taken towards a labor law, still in its infancy, which responded to the growing demands of workers organized into trade unions. Strikes, demands for shorter working hours and workers' demonstrations began to burst into the public space, forcing the State to address the questioning of the political and social exclusion on which the regime was built.

Contrasts were marked in the period. While in the international arena Argentina was seen as a country of promises, able to feed Europe and attract foreign investment, domestic inequalities were increasing. The middle classes were slowly expanding, made up of immigrants who managed to achieve upward mobility through trade, education or professional occupations. In parallel, the popular sectors organized themselves into societies and mutual aid organizations, anticipating the emergence of broader political movements in the following decades. On the cultural level, Buenos Aires became a vibrant metropolis. Theatre, opera and literature flourished in the heat of ever more intense urban life. The Congress itself became a place to socialize, where parliamentary debate coexisted with social gatherings and ceremonies that mixed institutional solemnity with the practices of an elite accustomed to display their power.

In a nutshell, the “Top Hats’ House” symbolizes a stage of chiaroscuro. It was a time of unequalled agro-export economic growth and wealth, but also of social inequality and electoral fraud. It was the time when Congress became a forum for founding laws and, at the same time, an arena of manifest elitism. The Argentina that emerged from this period was better connected, more populous and with a more consolidated State, but it kept the democratization of its political life pending. That debt would begin to be settled only in 1912, with the enactment of the Sáenz Peña Act, which established secret and mandatory male suffrage, thus opening a new chapter in the history of the Argentine Parliament.

Evolution of the electoral system in Argentina

This period was more stable not only economically but also on the political and electoral spheres. In addition, an opposition started to emerge within the ruling elite, which began to shift from an alliance of notables to the formation of political parties, such as the Radical Civic Union (Unión Cívica Radical) and the Socialist Party. Regardless of these changes, the same requirements and mechanisms for registration and management of the electoral process were maintained during the period.

Later this stage, there begins a process of political instability after the revolution of 1890, the resignation of President Luis Sáenz Peña and the electoral rise of the Radical Civic Union in the Federal Capital and in the province of Buenos Aires. Moreover, the increasing migratory flow and economic growth were creating a more complex society in which mutual aid associations were formed to defend the interests of each community. The influx of new immigrants also brought new

ideas that had an impact on many sectors looking for ways to express themselves. In consequence, it was necessary for the government to provide responses and containment. This is why President Roca (1898-1904) sent three bills to Congress, two of which were passed: compulsory military service (law No. 4031 of 1901), the labor code (rejected) and the electoral reform (law No. 4161 of 1902).

As for the electoral reform bill sent by the Executive to Congress at the behest of Joaquín V. González, then Minister of the Interior, some changes were rejected by the Senate, namely the introduction of secret ballot, the setting the legal voting age at 16 (it remained at 18) and the simplification of naturalization process for foreigners.

In short, law No. 4161 entailed an important electoral reform for the elections of national deputies, with the introduction of a system based on the creation of as many constituencies as the number of deputies assigned to each electoral district (provinces and federal capital) so that one deputy was elected in each constituency. Thus, the country was divided into 120 constituencies without changing the provincial borders established by the Constitution. Each province was divided according to the number of deputies assigned to it. For example, the city of Buenos Aires, which had twenty deputies assigned, was divided into the same number of constituencies.

The new system was first applied to the elections of 1904, when elections were held in 11 constituencies of the city of Buenos Aires as half of the House was being renewed. It is worth mentioning that it was in this election when the first socialist deputy, Alfredo Palacios, was elected by the fourth constituency of the city La Boca-Barracas, given the social characteristics of the population and the insertion of this party in that area.

As a majority voting system, it attempted to provide representation to other political views, which the winner-take-all system did not allow. Unfortunately, it was applied only once and, in 1905, through the laws No. 4578 and No. 4719, the winner-take-all system was reintroduced.

Although the secret ballot was not approved, the introduction of the debate made it possible to pass it through the enactment of law No. 8871 in 1912.