

Democracy or Dictatorship? Juan Manuel de Rosas and English-speaking Perspectives of the River Plate, 1816 – 1852

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In 1853, an English merchant and traveler named William MacCann published his findings from an eleven-year journey during which he crossed over two thousand miles on horseback through the Argentine provinces. What would become the Argentine Republic in 1860 was, at the time of MacCann's journey, a very loose Confederation of autonomous provinces. Juan Manuel de Rosas was twice Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, the most important province, first between 1829 and 1831, reelected in 1835, and ousted from power in 1852. As Governor, he was in charge of the foreign relations of the Confederation. Rosas was the most famous caudillo in Latin America – a military leader from the countryside, who was granted extraordinary power by the legislature to deal with the ongoing internal conflict between the two parties that had emerged after the Wars of Independence, the Federalists and the Unitarians, as well as with international conflicts with external conflicts with foreign nations. To end the constant turmoil, the caudillo governor cemented his hold on the divided country using methods of despotic rule. State terror silenced political opponents, who were threatened, exiled, tortured, or killed. In an interview with Rosas on his legacy, the Governor told MacCann his one desire: “All he wanted – all the country wanted – was that the real truth should be told.”¹ Though he successfully resisted a blockade between Britain and France in the 1840s, Rosas later fell from power in 1852 after internal rivals challenged his rule. After his fall, MacCann reflected that even those “who deemed the policy of that Dictator inimical to the political freedom and commercial prosperity of the countries on the

¹ William MacCann, *Two Thousand Miles' Ride Through the Argentine Provinces*, Vol. 2. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1853). 6.

Plate” must be convinced that the problems of the country lay “deeper than any system of government or the policy of any dictator.”²

The initial perception of Rosas after his downfall was shaped by his political rivals, who focused on the brutal methods by which he held on to power. In the twentieth century, many historians argued that Rosas was a democratic leader who did what was necessary in order to restore order to the country. Recent scholarship has found a third consideration of Rosas that lands in neither camp. In the late 1980s century, historian John Lynch argued that Rosas embodied all of the aspects of a personal dictatorship, yet enjoyed a legitimacy derived from “republican principles and virtues.”³ What has become clear from these debates is that writing off the years of Rosas’ rule as an aberration of democracy and an example of pure despotism ignores the popular support that he enjoyed amongst common people, particularly the gauchos of the countryside and the Afro-Argentines. Recently, historian Ariel de la Fuente posited that caudillo culture and the caudillismo system represented a type of democratic mobilization of the gauchos, the poorest residents of the countryside. Argentine political scientist José Luis Romero described this type of support as a kind of “inorganic democracy,” born out of an opposition to the liberal ideals espoused by revolutionary leaders in Buenos Aires during the post-independence period.⁴

The scholarly debates on the Rosas era have fittingly relied on a myriad of primary sources from within the provinces themselves. Most notably, Domingo F. Sarmiento, a politician and second president of Argentina (1869-1874), unleashed a scathing critique of Rosas, caudillos, and his effect on life in Argentina. What has largely been unexplored, however, are the perspectives of

² MacCann, *Two Thousand Miles*, Vol. 1, xiii.

³ John Lynch, *Argentine Caudillo: Juan Manuel de Rosas* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2001), 164.

⁴ José Luis Romero, *A History of Argentine Political Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963). 93.

English-speakers from the United States and Great Britain, as well as the value of their perspectives for understanding political life under Rosas' rule and in assessing his legacy. This paper will examine whether these sources help find a place Rosas, one of the most central figures in Argentine history, within these debates.

This thesis posits that ultimately, both contemporary American and British perceptions of Rosas are nuanced and mediated by economic and political interests, yet still offer helpful characterization on Rosas' impact on the River Plate. While in power, the British were willing to look past Rosas' despotic tendencies so long as trade went unhindered and the government eagerly enlisted him as a diplomatic partner. The British perspectives grapple with the legacy of Rosas, albeit within a prejudicial context that is clouded by their economic interests in the region. On the other hand, perspectives from the United States are extremely telling, as a significant dichotomy emerged between the attitudes of American diplomats and the letters and editorials from the general public. Ultimately, both perspectives offer a valid consideration when examining Rosas and his place within Argentine history, as they help to triangulate the conversation around his legacy.

The majority of the collected primary sources examined here come from reports in American periodicals and British newspapers on the affairs of the River Plate from 1829 to 1852. These journals and chronicles include the publications of travelers, political commentators, military officers, and immigrants to the River Plate. American diplomatic correspondence was often published in these same periodicals, while I relied on the Parliamentary Papers to provide the perspectives from the British government. Finally, the extensive archives of the Baring Brothers bank help to illustrate the significant financial interests Great Britain held in the region, as well as the general frustration felt towards the constant turmoil in the River Plate.

This thesis will begin by thoroughly examining the origins of Rosas' rule and how scholars have characterized his government, particularly as it relates to the history and development of democracy in Argentina. In order to effectively consider the relevance of English-speaking perspectives of life under Rosas, a detailed description of post-independence life in Argentina must be examined. Specific attention will be devoted to the conflict between Federalists and Unitarians, the country's two political factions, as well as to considering what democracy and political participation meant for the time period. From there, the discussion will move into the prevailing Argentine perspectives of Rosas, both from his contemporaries and how he has been viewed in recent years. Finally, the collection of primary sources will be examined in relation to how the events of Rosas' regime unfolded, comparing the British and American perspectives.

Federalists, Unitarians, and Provincial Authority

The provinces of the River Plate were certainly not united in 1816. The declaration of independence by the Congress in the city of Tucumán brought to light divisions within the political leaders that would last for the next several decades. An attempt to pass a constitution proposing to unite these territories under a centralist republic failed in 1819, and the provinces became politically divided into two groups. Unitarians were largely made up of liberals who espoused the ideals of Enlightenment figures like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke and believed in the power of a strong, central authority based in Buenos Aires.⁵ Meanwhile, Federalists valued the autonomy of the provinces and proposed a decentralized, federal republic, following the model of the United States.

⁵ Jorge Myers, "'Democracy in South America,' The 'New Generation' and the Reception of Tocqueville's *De La Démocratie En Amérique*: The Path of River Plate Liberalism, 1840-1852," in *Imported Modernity in Post-Colonial State Formation: The Appropriation of Political, Educational, and Cultural Models in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, ed. Eugenia Roldán Valdera and Marcelo Caruso (New York City: Peter Lang, 2007), 156.

Buenos Aires enjoyed status as the “principal province” of the River Plate. It held a natural geographic advantage due to its position on the coast where it could control and tax international trade coming into the Plata River, the river that gives the region its name, through the main port of the region. Additionally, the provinces of the River Plate were sparsely populated, with the majority of the population concentrated in the city of Buenos Aires, the old capital of the Viceroyalty. In 1816, there were only 507,591 people in the provinces; even in 1850, the population density was barely more than one person per square mile.⁶ The caudillos of the surrounding provinces around Buenos Aires – known as the littoral – were particularly concerned about the provisions within the failed constitution that they believed infringed upon the “sovereignty of the people.”⁷ One of their central demands was that the revenues from the international port of Buenos Aires should be shared with the remaining provinces. This was not a minor request as international trade was the main source of revenue for the region. Since it comprises 80% of the budget of the province of Buenos Aires, its leaders were not willing to share the revenue with the other provinces.

In 1820, the governors of the provinces of Santa Fe and Entre Ríos marched their armies to Buenos Aires and effectively put an end to the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata. This move kicked off a decade of interprovincial warfare, where various provincial leaders emerged as *caudillos*, backed by their own troops who were willing to fight to the end. These troops – known as *montoneras* – were loose militias that rose in an armed disturbance, and engendered the ability of *caudillismo* to firmly take hold in the provinces.⁸ In the wake of the dissolution of the United Provinces, while political leaders in Buenos Aires attempted to reorganize the country along some

⁶ Lynch, *Argentine Caudillo*, 35.

⁷ Shumway, *A Woman*, 104.

⁸ The term *montonero* refers to “one who rebelled for political reasons against the departmental, provisional, or national authorities. De la Fuente, *Children of Facundo*, 77.

semblance of a national unity, the caudillos, determined to keep their autonomy, remained a powerful and destabilizing force.

Rivadavia, the Banda Oriental and the Emergence of Rosas

During the 1820s in the River Plate, amidst a series of external conflicts, there was a second attempt for national unity. In the years after 1816, the threat of war with Spain kept the peace amongst the provinces. This time, the threat was much closer, and stemmed from a conflict over the status of the Banda Oriental (present-day Uruguay), which had been a point of contention between Spain and Portugal for centuries. Like the Argentines, Uruguayans had fought for independence from Spain in the wake of the May Revolutions of 1810. The city of Montevideo, positioned along the northeastern bank of the Río de la Plata, emerged as a rival to the city of Buenos Aires and it briefly affiliated itself with the provinces of Santa Fe and Entre Rios of the United Provinces of the River Plate before the Portuguese Empire's annexation in 1822. In 1825, a local group of Uruguayans met and declared their allegiance to the United Provinces of the River Plate, and in response, newly independent Brazil declared war.

It was within this context that a second attempt at an Argentinian constitution began, under a new Congress in Buenos Aires in 1824. In 1826, the Congress proposed a centralist republic and elected President Bernardino Rivadavia, a Unitarian *porteño* who believed that a strong, central authority could coexist with the caudillos.⁹ He was wrong, and almost immediately after the new constitution was approved, the provincial caudillos rejected it, and in the face of insurmountable challenges with the war with Brazil, Rivadavia resigned in 1827.¹⁰ Many thought that only a very strong figure could bring order to the internal chaos and protect the region from external threats.

⁹ Romero, *A History of Argentine Political Thought*, 90.

¹⁰ Romero, *A History of Argentine Political Thought*, 93

This power and person manifested in Juan Manuel de Rosas, who was appointed to his first term as Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires in 1829 and given extraordinary powers – *facultades extraordinarias* – for a period of six months to deal with the crisis. By this time, Rosas had cemented himself as a capable military leader and extremely successful rancher accumulating over 300,000 cattle and 420,000 acres of land.¹¹

As Governor, even though he was a Federalist, Rosas claimed to eschew political affiliation stating “I don’t belong to any party but my country,” and promising that the will of the people would serve as the “fundamental base of the organization of the Republic.”¹² With the extraordinary authority given to him by the legislature, Rosas dealt with the problems facing the country: Unitarian forces had united under the banner of the League of the North and troops rallied under General José María Paz, and Federalists were divided over how much power Rosas should have. Additionally, large public debts, deficits, and a severe drought wreaked havoc on the economy.¹³

By the completion of Rosas’ first term in office in 1832, the financial concerns were largely settled, General Paz had been captured, and the Unitarian threat had been largely eliminated thanks to Rosas’ unification efforts that brought Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Corrientes and Entre Ríos into a confederation after they signed the Federalist Pact.¹⁴ In 1834, General Facundo Quiroga, an ally of Rosas from the province of La Rioja, was assassinated, and the country yet again teetered on the edge of Civil War. While Rosas left office after his first term to lead a large campaign against the Natives in the south of Buenos Aires, a “Revolution of the Restorers” clamored for him to

¹¹ Lynch, *Argentine Caudillo*, 27.

¹² Shumway, *A Woman*, 147.

¹³ Lynch, *Argentine Caudillo*, 16.

¹⁴ Shumway, *A Woman*, 151.

return to office.¹⁵ To the relief of the “restorers” – a coalition made up of both the common people and the landed elite – Rosas returned to power in 1835.

Rosas’ second ascension to national office differed from his prior in one significant way: this time, his extraordinary powers were more expansive and permanent. Rosas initially refused the appointment unless the legislature granted him the *suma del poder público* – the sum of all public power – all-encompassing control of the executive, legislature, and judiciary. But approval of the legislature wasn’t enough. In March 1835, he asked all males in the province, regardless of wealth or color, to vote on his governorship.¹⁶ The electoral law passed in 1821 had granted the right to vote to all men over 20 years of age, without any further qualifications, an unusual “universal suffrage” law for this time period. The large electoral support from the male population, jointly with the subsequent Plebiscite in 1835, gave Rosas the approval he desired: authentic power from not only the legislature, but the people.

Rosas and Contemporary Ideas of Democracy

In April 1835, Rosas addressed a crowd of thousands that had gathered to witness his inauguration into office. In his speech, Rosas stated that he had been authorized to wield “limitless power, that despite its odious nature” he had “deemed to be absolutely necessary to pull the country out of the abyss of misfortune in which it [was] sadly immersed.”¹⁷ The use of this power over the next twelve years – representing the remainder of his time in office – is at the center of the debate over his legacy. Was this power absolutely necessary? Was Rosas actually interested in upholding republican virtues? Was he a threat to democracy or a necessary means to achieve it?

¹⁵ Romero, *A History of Argentine Political Thought*, 117.

¹⁶ Shumway, *A Woman*, 166.

¹⁷ Shumway, *A Woman*, 167.

While these questions remain to this day, what is clear is how Rosas' political opponents saw him and his effect on the future of democracy in the River Plate/Argentina. Esteban Echeverría, Juan Bautista Alberdi, Bartolomé Mitre,¹⁸ and others made up a group of liberal intellectuals that would eventually become known as the 1837 Generation, named after the year they began to coalesce their opposition to Rosas' regime.¹⁹ To these men, Rosas was the result of an "erroneous" conception of democracy. In Echeverría's mind, true democracy was not "the absolute despotism of the masses, nor of the majorities" but the "rule of reason" exercised by "the sensible and rational part of the social community."²⁰ The critique that ultimately had the most lasting effect on characterizing the phenomenon of Rosas' time in office came from Domingo Sarmiento, another member of the 1837 Generation. From his exile in Santiago de Chile, Sarmiento authored *Facundo: Civilization or Barbarism* in 1845, which lay the blame for Rosas at the feet of the racial composition, the habits, and the general social structure of those who lived in the rural provinces. The system of a *montonera* supporting a caudillo, the one that had resulted in Rosas, was for Sarmiento the root cause of all problems in the River Plate:

This is the way, through such strange practices, that brute force came to predominate and the rule of the strongest, and authority without limits and without responsibility among those in command, and justice administered without system or discussion, came to be established in Argentine life.²¹

In the eyes of Sarmiento and his contemporaries, the country man – the gaucho – was representative of the "barbarism" that was endemic in the countryside and could not coexist with the "civilization" of the cities.

¹⁸ This group had a tremendous influence on the modern Argentine State. Alberdi drafted the Argentine Constitution in 1853 while Mitre became the first President of the Argentine Republic (1862-1868).

¹⁹ Myers, "Democracy in South America," 159.

²⁰ Eduardo Zimmermann, "Caudillos, Democracy, and Constitutionalism in mid Nineteenth-century Argentina," *The Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 26, no. 2 (July, 2020): pp. 191.

²¹ Romero, *A History of Argentine Political Thought*, 135.

Within this context, it is clear that while they existed in opposition to the Rosas regime, the attitudes of the 1837 Generation are in line with prevailing views on democracy at the time, mostly deriving from the European doctrinaires whose writings widely circulated amongst this group. Echeverría analyzed where his Unitarian predecessors erred and concluded that “in giving the ballot and the lance to the proletariat...put the destiny of the country at the mercy of the mob.” Alberdi agreed – the law that established universal suffrage in the province of Buenos Aires in 1821 resulted in a system that “bore the fruits it will always bear: as long as the mob is called on to vote, the mob will elect children who mouth pretty phrases.”²² After the downfall of Rosas, this generation would largely frame the narrative of his time in office along their own terms, and their writings and politics would guide the actions that would shape modern Argentina in the following decades.

Juan Bautista Alberdi wrote that if you take away the Revolution of May 1810, “and leave the counter-revolution that today grips the Argentine Republic...you will have not democracy, but only despotism.”²³ Alberdi was the author of the 1853 Constitution that (with some changes) has been in place in Argentina ever since, with the objective to achieve democracy and leave despotism behind. His critique of Rosas, as well as of other members of his generation, heavily framed the views of his rule in the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. However, this view contains an inherent flaw – it completely ignores the very real political life that was occurring in the interior provinces and in the cities.

Recent scholarship has begun to re-examine political participation in the time of Rosas. Ariel de la Fuente made the connection between the state, clientelism, and politics during the

²² Romero, *A History of Argentine Political Thought*, 137.

²³ Romero, *A History of Argentine Political Thought*, 141.

caudillismo era, particularly as it took place in the northwest province of La Rioja during the 1860s, after Rosas downfall. De la Fuente identified the relationship of the caudillos and their *montonera* base and the significant power that the latter held over the former, “The decisive factor in the political life of the province was, indeed ‘the people.’”²⁴ It was the caudillos’ ability to mobilize the *montonera* that gave them their power, and thus the mobilization of the individual *montonero* was itself a political act. Valentina Ayrolo and Eduardo Míguez identified the critical importance of this relationship stating that the “caudillo regimes that sought to establish themselves firmly in power had to make concessions to the subaltern sectors that had supported them, in order to retain their loyalty.”²⁵ In the era of Rosas and *caudillismo* culture, popular participation was the basis of power.

Additionally, Sarmiento’s description of a dialectical opposition between the civilized cities and the barbaric interior provinces was grossly misrepresented. Despite the constant chaos that was endemic before, during, and after the time of Rosas, law and legal practices were maintained by residents in the interior and borderlands provinces. Trading ties, particularly along the Uruguay river, created an ecosystem of cross-border connections where merchants and landowners strived to increase their economic opportunities and prospects.²⁶ As these networks became more developed, legal norms fell into place that were maintained without the influence of any centralized authority from Buenos Aires. Meanwhile, the war between Buenos Aires and Montevideo caused frequent incursions in the borderlands, where residents depended on these

²⁴ De la Fuente, *Children of Facundo*, 21.

²⁵ Valentina Ayrolo and Eduardo Míguez, “Reconstruction of the Socio-Political Order after Independence in Latin America. A Reconsideration of Caudillo Politics in the River Plate,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas – Anuario de Historia de America Latina* 49, 1 (2012): 131.

²⁶ Joseph P. Younger, “‘Monstrous and Illegal Proceedings’: Law, Sovereignty and Revolution in the Río de la Plata Borderlands, 1810-1880” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011), 62.

legal norms to protect their rights in a world of violence. Local judges and magistrates were regularly relied on when one party asserted his property rights over another.²⁷

The impact of the 1837 Generation on the narrative of state formation during and after Rosas can be seen in the *porteño* orientation of scholarly discussion that lasted into the twentieth century. The view of Sarmiento that civilization lies in the cities of the River Plate, and the frontier life is at the root of the barbarism that made the Rosas regime possible, discounts the political participation of those in the countryside who used mobilization to demonstrate their power.

It also fails to recognize the makeup of the *montoneras* themselves. In addition to gauchos, Afro-Argentines, who were most likely *libertos* (freed slaves) seeking to find a place in society, found a home in *monteneras*.²⁸ These groups combined with the interests of the wealthy landowners to form a coalition that would serve as the primary base of Rosas' political support, and were the ones who confirmed his extraordinary power with their votes in the 1835 Plebiscite.

British Perspectives of the River Plate

From the outset of independence, British citizens both inside and outside of the government took a vested interest in the happenings of the river plate. First and foremost, among items of interest concerned matters of trade, which largely centered on the city of Buenos Aires. A characterization of the history of the relationship between Great Britain and published in the *Dublin University Magazine* recognized that “a government so sharp-sighted as ours in all matters relating to commercial interests...has occupied men for many years; and so far back as 1806, when Sir Home Popham attacked Buenos Ayres.”²⁹ The merchant community recognized and

²⁷ Younger, “Monstrous and Illegal Proceedings,” 206.

²⁸ Ayrolo and Míguez, “Reconstruction,” 116.

²⁹ “Rosas and La Plata.” *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature (1844-1898)*, Jul 1852. 409. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries. 1806 refers to the first British invasions to the River Plate

appreciated Rosas' reputation as a stabilizing force, and the liberalization of trade attracted many British entrepreneurs to Buenos Aires.³⁰

In 1825, a treaty was signed between the United Provinces of Rio de la Plata and the United Kingdom that recognized the "extensive commercial intercourse" that had been established for years between the two countries.³¹ In the wake of the treaty's approval by the House of Commons, merchant banks took the opportunity to lend the United Provinces a significant sum of credit. In March of that year, L.M. Simon, Agent for the Purchase and Sale of Foreign Securities Stock at Barings Bank, described "the state of Buenos Ayres" as possessing the "improved state of financial political resources of South America...The advantages of such a financial operation in so prosperous a country, were too obvious to escape the attention of the Capitalist."³² As the regime of Rivadavia collapsed and the conflict between the federalists and unitarians engulfed Buenos Aires, the optimism felt by the British community towards developments in the River Plate turned to a pessimistic notion that the region, due to the makeup of the populace, was incapable of self-rule and threatened the further development of trade.

British commercial agent and travel writer William MacCann reflected on the Rivadavia government several decades after his exit from power and did not mince words when it came to evaluating his legacy. Although MacCann believed "this personage was influenced by the most enlightened views," he also "totally misunderstood the character of his fellow citizens."³³ Here, it

³⁰ Iain A.D. Stewart, "Living with Dictator Rosas: Argentina through Scottish Eyes," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 29, no. 1 (February 1997): pp. 24.

³¹ "Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation between H.M. and United Provinces of Rio de la Plata, Buenos Ayres, February 1825." February 2, 1825. 19th Century House of Commons Sessional Papers, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online

³² "Typed Letter from L.M. Simon, Agent for the Purchase and Sale of Foreign Securities on Buenos Aires Stock." Public Statements on the Financial State of Buenos Aires, House Correspondence Latin America 1817-1929, The Baring Archive

³³ MacCann, *Two Thousand Miles' Ride*, vol. 2, 160.

is important to contextualize MacCann's perspective of the Rosas regime within the grander scheme of how he viewed the development of political and economic life in general within the region. The very same gaucho that was outfitted with British goods as described by Parish was incapable of being governed, in MacCann's mind. MacCann described the term gaucho as "offensive to the mass of the people, being understood to mean a person who has no local habitation but lives a nomadic life."³⁴ Echoing the criticisms of Sarmiento in *Facundo*, in MacCann's mind, much of the country's problems in the 1820s can be blamed on the gaucho's "primitive habits of idleness" that confined him to a "state of comparative barbarism."³⁵ The deviation between Sarmiento and MacCann is that the former equates Rosas' regime with this barbarism, while the latter views it as an answer to the turbulent conflicts of the 1820s.

British perspectives of Rosas increased in frequency as he rose to power after his first term as Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires. In 1833, he met the naturalist Charles Darwin, who was left with quite an impression of the governor. Darwin reflected that Rosas was "a man of extraordinary character, and he has a most predominant influence in the country, which it seems probably he will use to its prosperity and advancement."³⁶ The first real test of Rosas' regime was over the status of the Banda Oriental, after former Uruguayan President and Unitarian Fructuoso Rivera rebelled against his successor and Rosas ally, Manuel Oribe. The status of the Banda Oriental had been a contentious issue since independence, and in 1837 it became a proxy conflict between the Federalists and Unitarians. Despite the tension in the conflict, the perspective of the British within the provinces was that there was little threat to Rosas' regime. Writing to his brother, Scottish pastoral farmer Robert Gibson remarked "If the people of the country would not now

³⁴ MacCann, *Two Thousand Miles' Ride*, vol. 1, 154.

³⁵ MacCann, *Two Thousand Miles Ride*, vol. 1, 158.

³⁶ Lynch, *Argentine Caudillo*, 29.

follow [Rosas] from love, they would do so from fear.”³⁷ Gibson’s attitude reflected a common condescension that appeared in other sources, including MacCann. In his mind, Rivera’s revolt was “further proof...of the futility of thinking that these people are in a state to govern themselves by constitutions and laws.”³⁸

The conflict within the Banda Oriental would spell the beginning of the end for Rosas. While British merchants in the early 1830s lauded his return to power, towards the end of the decade his meddling in Uruguayan affairs was viewed as a source of disruption in the region.³⁹ As Rivera gained some initial successes in his rebellion, MacCann recorded that “fresh elements of discord daily augmented the strife.”⁴⁰ As the 1830s came to an end, Rosas was facing enemies from three sides: Rivera’s troops, who had successfully removed Oribe from power in the Banda Oriental; a renewed force of Unitarians that organized in opposition to Rosas; and now the French, who intervened on the part of Rivera to protect their own mercantile interests in Montevideo. French naval forces blockaded the city of Buenos Aires in 1838. The situation became so perilous for Robert Gibson, that the only remedy in his mind was for Rosas’ removal,

The storm now threatens Rosas on all sides, and I suspect not all his talent...will be sufficient to carry him through with success. He must fall, and the sooner the better. He has shown his obstinacy in the affair of the Blockade, brought distress and ruin upon many of the Country and his bloodthirsty prosecution of all those who dared to think for themselves will be a damnable stain on his memory.⁴¹

However, Rosas was able to survive – albeit only for the time being. While the conflict in the Banda Oriental escalated into the *Guerra Grande* (Great War), Rosas was able to put down the Unitarian invasion and find peace with the French in 1840.

³⁷ Stewart, “Living with Rosas,” 34.

³⁸ Stewart, “Living with Rosas,” 31.

³⁹ Shumway, *A Woman*, 201.

⁴⁰ MacCann, *Two Thousand Miles’ Ride*, vol. 2, 215.

⁴¹ Stewart, “Living with Rosas,” 39.

While Rosas incurred the wrath of the French in the early part of the conflict with Uruguay, he was able to maintain his relationship with His Majesty's government. Although the Baring Brothers aggressively sought payment for their loan, the government considered Rosas a steadfast partner. In September 1837, the bank wrote a letter to Lord Palmerston, then Foreign Secretary, pleading with him to intervene on their behalf with the government in Buenos Aires. The letter states, "We beg respectfully to request your Lordship will again instruct the British minister to communicate with the government of Buenos Ayres on behalf of the many sufferers from their defalcation."⁴² As the conflict over the Banda Oriental escalated, the British recognized that Rosas' attempts at expanding his sphere of influence were infringing upon their mercantile operations.

The Parana River allowed for trade into the previously inaccessible Paraguay, and the British would not accept any limits on its accessibility. The British imposed a blockade with the French in 1845. However, even with the intervention of their navy, the British did not consider themselves at war with Rosas or the Argentine Confederation. In his instructions to the new minister in Buenos Aires, William Gore Ouseley, Lord Palmerston made it clear that the attitudes from Great Britain to Rosas was "not one of hostility to that State, or the influential individual who is at the head of it," it was one of "friendship, in true regard for the interests of the Republic."⁴³ Yet still Rosas refused to budge, and the independence of the Banda Oriental became the sticking point between the two parties.

As the 1840s drew to a close and the blockade reached its fifth year of existence, questions began to emerge within the British government on the progress of Her Majesty's mission in Buenos

⁴² "Draft of a letter from an un-named writer to Lord Palmerston" Public Statements on the Financial State of Buenos Aires, House Correspondence Latin America 1817-1929, The Baring Archive

⁴³ "Instructions to H.M. Minister at Buenos Ayres, for Guidance in Joint Intervention by England and France between Buenos Ayres and Monte-Video, 1846." Command Papers, 19th Century House of Commons Sessional Papers, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online

Aires. With the cost of the blockade stacking up, the British were eager to come to terms with Rosas and bring a resolution to the blockade. In 1849, a convention was signed between Rosas and the British government that officially brought an end to the conflict. The treaty was a triumph for Rosas, who had successfully imposed his will on not one, but two European powers, and asserted his control in the River Plate. The treaty called for the “restoring of perfect relation of friendship” between Great Britain and the Argentine Confederation and made no demands on Rosas for ceasing the conflict within the Banda Oriental.⁴⁴

This loss was recognized in Great Britain. A letter to the editor of *The Morning Chronicle*, signed “a British sufferer,” was extremely critical of the compact, arguing that “it contains nothing but concession and invitations to the Governor of Buenos Ayres” and Great Britain would discover “how her honor is paltered away, and her treasure squandered to gratify the caprices and the cruel ambition of that bad man.”⁴⁵ The pessimism of this forecast did not come true, as the acclaim that Rosas achieved from defeating the blockade was short lived. Without an external force threatening the provinces, internal conflicts yet again emerged. By 1852, Rosas was out of power and on a steamship headed to England.

British retrospections of Rosas’ rule started almost immediately after his downfall. While some newspapers focused on how he “ruled in solitary terror” and “blood flowed by his commands as freely as water,” the questions about his legacy emerged. “Had General Rosas employed his authority differently,” posited the same editorial, “he might now be regarded as the Washington of

⁴⁴ “Argentine Confederation. Convention between Her Majesty and the Argentine Confederation, for the settlement of existing differences and the re-establishment of friendship. Signed at Buenos Ayres, November 24, 1849.” Command Papers, 19th Century House of Commons Sessional Papers, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online

⁴⁵ “The River Plate Question and Lord Palmerston’s Convention with General Rosas.” *Morning Chronicle*, March 30, 1850. British Library Newspapers, Gale Primary Sources

South America.”⁴⁶ In particular, British residents in Argentina were willing to excuse Rosas as a necessary evil. Reflecting on his time in the Buenos Aires province during the Rosas era, the Anglo-Argentine author W.H. Hudson remembered Rosas’ legacy as complex:

People were in perpetual conflict about the character of the great man. He was abhorred by many, perhaps by most, others were on his side even for years after he had vanished from their ken...all the crimes and cruelties practiced by Rosas, were not like the crimes committed by a private person, but were all for the good of the country, with the result that in Buenos Ayres and throughout our province there had been a long period of peace and prosperity.⁴⁷

Hudson’s attitude was the perception of Rosas in a nutshell: a dictator, but an acceptable one at that. The prejudicial attitudes that the British held towards the ability of Argentinians to self-govern in a democracy made them more willing to accept Rosas with all of his flaws.

After his downfall, the British considered the turbulent period that followed to be indicative of an inherent anarchy that plagued Argentinians. In 1853, one British editorial lamented that “the time...has not even yet arrived for the formation of a great State in the interior” and it may be that the provinces turn into a sad example “of the dangers and embarrassment of precipitating constitutions before the people to be ruled are fit for them.”⁴⁸ The influence of Sarmiento and *Facundo* can be seen throughout many authors, including MacCann, who claimed that the provinces’ inhabitants “never possessed with themselves the capabilities of steady progression.”⁴⁹ In the end, while heavily influenced by their own economic interests in the region, the British perspectives of the River Plate are still crucial to understanding Rosas’ regime. When properly contextualized, the merchant community within Buenos Aires, the banking community in the

⁴⁶ “Rosas and La Plata.” *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature*, 419.

⁴⁷ Stewart, “Living with Rosas,” 43-44.

⁴⁸ “Rio de La Plata - Its Latest History.” *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature (1844-1898)*, Apr 1853. 497. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries

⁴⁹ MacCann, *Two Thousand Miles Ride*, vol. 2, 219.

United Kingdom, and the positions of the British government provide an extensive amount of material with which to analyze and understand the rule of Juan Manuel de Rosas.

The United Provinces and the United States

In contrast to the British, the United States maintained a much more distant relationship to the United Provinces before, during, and after the time of Rosas. The turmoil that immediately preceded Rosas' time in office did not go unnoticed, and the American view of the Provinces after 1816 was largely that the country started off promising, before descending into chaos. A letter from Mr. Gilbert H. Rogers of New York, sent from the city of Buenos Aires, reported in 1819 that "It might naturally be concluded that a people living in so fine a climate, and enjoying so many natural advantages, required nothing but their independence to make them happy...but the time is far distant when they will acquire this great and invaluable blessing."⁵⁰ In particular, the conflict between Federalist and Unitarians as well as the contest between Buenos Aires and Montevideo, dominated the conversation. Still, letters from travelers like Mr. Rogers, as well as diplomatic missives sent from American diplomats, help to triangulate the perspectives of life under Rosas' rule.

Despite the physical distance between the two countries and the differences in culture, there was – at least initially – a sense of kinship between the United States and the people of South America. In 1822, in a letter to the first session of the Seventeenth Congress, President James Monroe described an affinity for the "revolutionary movement in the Spanish provinces in this

⁵⁰ "Buenos Ayres: Extract of a letter from Mr Gilbert H Rogers, of New York, dated Buenos Ayres, April 20th, 1819." *The Weekly Recorder; a Newspaper Conveying Important Intelligence and Other Useful Matter Under the Three General Heads of Theology, Literature, and National Affairs (1814-1821)*, Jul 23, 1819. 400. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries

hemisphere” which garnered the “sympathy of our fellow-citizens from its commitment.”⁵¹ In 1827, an American Captain F.B. Head described the political situation post-independence as “analogous circumstances that compelled us to a separation from Great Britain.” Yet in the same writings that described his journey across the provinces, Head realized the conflict between Federalists and Unitarians doomed any chances of Rivadavia’s government.⁵²

An assessment of the pre-Rosas period includes the many assassinations that seem to permeate the country and are symptomatic of the anarchy that preceded him. An American naval officer’s perspective published in 1838 described Rosas’ ability to “put a stop, to great measure, the assassinations which were formerly so numerous.”⁵³ Indeed, as soon as Rosas came into power in 1829, the diplomatic messages sent back to the United States were full of optimism. John M. Forbes, the *chargé d’affaires* stationed in the city of Buenos Aires from 1820 to 1831, wrote prolifically as he witnessed the rise of Rosas. After a private meeting in November 1829 where they discussed Rosas’ political hopes for his country, Forbes was convinced that Rosas was a man of “magnanimity and moderation.”⁵⁴

Forbes passed away in 1831 and his successor, Francis Baylies, disagreed vehemently with him, and indicted not only Rosas but all of his subjects. In Baylies’ mind, the Argentines “have no idea of that feeling which we call love of country...the revolutions of these people are seditious...their patriotism, bluster; their liberty, a farce.”⁵⁵ Baylies’ attitudes influenced the

⁵¹ “Seventeenth Congress - first session.” *Niles’ Weekly Register (1814-1837)*, Mar 16, 1822. 42. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries

⁵² “Buenos Ayres and the Pampas.” *The American Quarterly Review (1827-1837)*, Dec 1 1830. 253. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries

⁵³ “Leaves from My Journal.” *The Gentleman’s Magazine (1837-1839)*, Oct 1838. 263. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries

⁵⁴ William Dusenberry, “Juan Manuel de Rosas as Viewed by Contemporary American Diplomats,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 41, no. 4 (November 1961): 497.

⁵⁵ Dusenberry, “Juan Manuel de Rosas,” 499.

diplomatic relationship between the United States and Rosas. In 1832, after a dispute over American fishing vessels, relations were broken for more than a decade. The actions of Rosas clearly had an influence on the perspectives of Americans, who quickly associated his despotic tendencies with the support given to him by his base.

Despite President Monroe's statement in 1822 of public support and empathy for the independence of the Argentine provinces, the overall American perception of gauchos and their way of life was negative. In 1817, Forbes' predecessor, Henry Brackenridge, noted that the gauchos had a "passion" for liberty (a cause near and dear to the United States), but a kind of liberty that enabled "unbounded licentiousness" which existed with "the most absolute submissions to their chiefs...which depended on popularity."⁵⁶ This characterization is ubiquitous in American portraits of gauchos at the time, and Rosas is often described as "the leader" of the gauchos, in personal style as well as behavior. When attention is given to Rosas, the man, however, attitudes are as disparate as the ones previously examined from Forbes and Baylies.

In 1841, an unauthored account published in *The Monthly Chronicles of Events, Discoveries, Improvements, and Opinions* of the political situation in Buenos Aires anticipated the challenges of characterizing Rosas' regime: "Probably he is not so black as he has been painted; few men are...He has great energy...for good as well as for evil, and is evidently a man of strong native talent."⁵⁷ Even Baylies could not help but give Rosas some compliments, stating that he "possessed much personal beauty, having a large, commanding figure and a fine face."⁵⁸ A common comparison to President Andrew Jackson appears especially amongst the American

⁵⁶ Romero, *A History of Argentine Political Thought*, 99.

⁵⁷ "Article XVII: Buenos Ayres. Its Recent Contest With France, and its Present Political Situation." *The Monthly Chronicle of Events, Discoveries, Improvements, and Opinions*. (1840-1842), Nov/Dec 1841. 511.

⁵⁸ Dusenberry, "Juan Manuel de Rosas," 498.

diplomatic community. In 1844, Harvey M. Watterson was charged as “Special Agent” of the State Department to Buenos Aires. After Watterson was received by Rosas, he described him as a “real General Jackson of a fellow”, who was “a man of the people”, and “one of nature’s noblemen.” An article in the *Maine Farmer* also described Rosas as “much like old General Jackson – obstinate, self-willed, and resolute to desperation.”⁵⁹ The sympathy and affection given to Rosas by Watterson and other American diplomats are endemic in this period and would only increase after the British and French blockade in 1845.

At this time, there was a stark disconnect between the perspectives of Rosas from these diplomats and those of the general American public. Rosas was described by Edward A. Hopkins, *chargé d'affaires* to Paraguay, as “a man who loves American principles and liberty” and, as the situation worsened under the blockade in 1846, the belief by the American diplomatic community in Buenos Aires was that Rosas was the only one who could hold the country together.⁶⁰

In 1845, the editors of *The American Review* grappled with the situation in the River Plate. Rosas’ government was described as “A pure dictatorship, established and upheld in a Republic by violence and blood, speedily makes it anything else than a Republic.”⁶¹ To reinforce their claim, an accompanying letter from Mrs. S. P. Jenkins, an American who lived in Buenos Aires, was included with their assessment. Mrs. Jenkins compares Rosas to a “modern Nero” who is responsible for “the annihilation of every germ of morality, civilization, and intellectual advancement.” The same editorial in *The Albion* that complimented Venezuela and Páez stated

⁵⁹ “Important from the River of Plate.” *Maine Farmer* (1844-1900), April 1, 1852. 2. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries

⁶⁰ Dusenberry, “Juan Manuel de Rosas,” 504.

⁶¹ “Buenos Aires and the Republic of the Banda Oriental.” *The American Review: A Whig Journal of Politics, Literature, Art and Science* (1845-1847), Feb 1846. 160. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries

that “the career of Rosas has been signalized by acts so atrocious as to mark him for a fiend rather than a man.”⁶² While American diplomats stationed in Buenos Aires were increasing their sympathy to the Governor’s plight, their fellow citizens thought him the worst kind of dictator.

The uniqueness of the American perspective of the River Plate lies in the frequent comparison between the recent histories of the two countries. When examining these analyses in context with the views of the 1837 Generation, particularly those expressed by Sarmiento in *Facundo*, a clear relation can be seen. An editorial in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in 1846 states that “the interior of the country of the Argentines has had a peculiar influence upon their civilization.”⁶³ Frequently, the problems for the current situation in the River Plate, irrespective of the author’s view of Rosas, are placed upon the perceived deficiencies rooted in gaucho culture. When comparing the development of the political system of the United States to that of the River Plate, American editorials identified the gaucho as the outlier. In 1851, an article in the *New York Daily Tribune* described gauchos as “savages” who were “accustomed to civil war” and were “merciless and ready to take life.”⁶⁴ American attitudes identified with Sarmiento and, by association, with the Unitarians. Any semblance of similarities between the United States and the provinces were associated with the administration and aspirations of Rivadavia. The same article in the *New York Daily Tribune* identified the Unitarians as the “the men to whom civilized life and cultivation were not unknown...they were emulous of the freedom and growth of the great Republic of North America.”⁶⁵ Despite this abrogation of any similarity between the two countries,

⁶² “Affairs of the River Plate,” *The Albion*, 454.

⁶³ “Rosas.” *The United States Magazine, and Democratic Review (1837-1851)*, May 1846. 369. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries

⁶⁴ “The War on the River Plata.” *New York - Daily Tribune (1842-1866)*, Nov 1851. 4. American Periodical Series Online, The Center for Research Libraries

⁶⁵ “The War on the River Plata.” *New York - Daily Tribune*, 4.

American examinations about Rosas' legacy after his fall from power continued to raise the question about how he would be remembered.

The retrospectives of Rosas after he was deposed vary widely, from complete condemnation of a brutal dictator to a man doing the best he could given the circumstances. The former view is typified by the last American *chargé d'affaires* to Rosas' government, John S. Pendleton, who wrote in 1851 that the Rosas regime was "the most simple and rigorous despotism in the civilized world."⁶⁶ The latter is exemplified by one opinion expressed in *The New York Daily Times*:

But who supposes for a moment that his Government, or any other, in such a condition of society, could be conducted on peace principles? Rosas has been reckless in his cruelties, and indiscriminate in their bestowal...His atrocities, if they deserve the name, have been committed in self-defense, and have been magnified beyond all reason by the inveterate animosity of those who suffered beneath his iron rule.

It is evident that the debate over Rosas' legacy started even then, which is all the more reason why English-speaking perspectives are worthy of consideration.

Conclusion

In the context of the demands for decolonization in Academia, it may be trivial, or even wrong to write about English-speaking views on Rosas. However, the use of these sources in offering contemporaries' perspectives from travelers, foreign residents and diplomats is extremely relevant in adding to the debate on Rosas' place in Argentine history, a debate that continues until today. This debate can only be fueled by adding new perspectives, local and foreign, on one of the most controversial figures in Argentina. Furthermore, the analysis of these sources is also pertinent

⁶⁶ Dusenberry, "Juan Manuel de Rosas," 504.

as they help to shape the views held in the English-speaking world about Rosas and South America as a land of violence and terror, where it would be impossible to achieve democracy.

Despite the brutality of Rosas during his twenty years in office, Argentinians remain split over his legacy. In 1989, over one hundred years since the end of his rule, Rosas' body was returned to Argentina, received in a repatriation ceremony by President Carlos Menem and hundreds of thousands of Argentinians.⁶⁷ In 2007, President Nestor Kirchner's announcement that his wife, Senator Cristina Kirchner, would be his presidential successor was met with cries that this was an act of despotic rule, evocative of the time of Rosas. Critics claimed that one could draw a straight line from the Kirchners to Juan Manuel de Rosas, with Carlos Menem and Juan Domingo Perón bridging the gaps.⁶⁸ Depending on who you ask, and which political party they support, one may say he was a man who was given extraordinary power with popular support, while others will say he was a despotic tyrant.

What is clear from the recent scholarly debates around Rosas' base of support is that the common people of the River Plate considered him their champion. At the time, Argentinians like Domingo Sarmiento and Esteban Echeverría denounced the gauchos as the cause of all political problems in their country because they embodied a kind of barbarism that had enabled Rosas. In the mind of the 1837 Generation, the 1821 law of universal suffrage legitimized Rosas' rise to power supported by the "mob". Yet as Ariel de La Fuente and others have explored, the mobilization of the gauchos was a type of political participation in and of itself. Furthermore,

⁶⁷ Eugene Robinson, "Argentines Cheer Returning Hero – 112 Years After Death," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 1989, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/10/02/argentines-cheer-returning-hero_112-years-after-death/854362bd-2df1-4a12-84e9-9cc92e14a72f/

⁶⁸ Martin Lagos, "Rosas, Perón, Menem, los Kirchner: esa vieja manía de querer perpetuarse en el poder," *La Nación*, September 15, 2020, Opinion, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/opinion/rosas-peron-menem-kirchner-esa-vieja-mania-nid2450101>

contrary to what was depicted in *Sarmiento's* *Facundo*, a society of rule and law did exist in the Argentine interior. As Argentinians developed complicated networks of trade and expanded property ownership within the interior, local magistrates and judges were called upon to arbitrate litigious disputes.

In this context, the perspectives of English-speaking diplomats and merchants of life in the River Plate under Juan Manuel de Rosas are highly relevant to fully understanding his legacy. They were not directly involved in the fight between Unitarians and Federalists nor in Rosas' rise to power. Their views can help triangulate the Argentine perspectives of Rosas, so long as *their own* biases and intentions are contextualized. The British immediately developed a significant economic interest in the country and were willing to excuse Rosas' behavior while he did not stand in the way of their mercantile goals. As soon as he did, they were not afraid to intervene, and they would continue to entrench themselves in the development of Argentina's economy throughout the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the Americans were far more removed from the River Plate's economic interests. Yet nearly every diplomat in Buenos Aires, even if they defined Rosas as a brutal dictator, praised him personally. Editorials published in American newspapers and periodicals, as well as letters from travelers who have returned from Buenos Aires, contain the same dichotomy and ambiguity. Frequently, Juan Manuel de Rosas is described as Jacksonian in nature – an apt comparison, given the complexity of the legacy of the seventh President of the United States. However, the same editorials published condemnations of the method by which he held on to power.

The views of the merchants and diplomats from Great Britain and the United States must be held in concert with those from the country itself. Certainly, these views should not be given more weight than those of the Argentines – ultimately, the question of where Rosas falls in the

country's history deserves an Argentinian answer. However, given the sheer magnitude of political developments in the post-independence River Plate, it would be folly to not consider English-speaking perspectives of the Rosas regime. The thirty-six years in the River Plate from 1816 to 1852, from the call for independence to the start of the institutional organization of the county, was a period that saw a tremendous amount of transformation. With that transformation came a significant degree of complexity – a kind of complexity that is missed when simply categorizing Rosas in a dichotomy between brutal dictator, or a populist with the support of the common people. English-speaking perspectives of Rosas cannot answer whether the “Restorer of Laws” belongs to either camp. They can, however, add several significant brush strokes to the picture of the River Plate as it existed under Rosas' rule, offering nuance and perspective that are critical to evaluating his legacy.

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