

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

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The City Hotel
Córdoba, Córdoba
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

There is a tendency in the Argentine to ascribe little importance to the role which the "little people" will play in the years to come. I am interested in this view because, to use a phrase of Damon Runyon's, little people have the habit of becoming "more important than somewhat." In Argentina there is the substantially rich class as represented by estancieros, a few processors and industrialists who have attained wealth and position, and business and professional people. All in all, however, the rich are mostly of the landed class. The middle class, developing in the few large cities that there are, can be distinguished from the little people more by their educational and cultural superiority than their material wealth and earning power. The little people are poor. Some of them are just poor. Others are poorer. And still others are desperately poor. They are, specifically, the jornaleros of the cities, the day laborers. They are the peons of the cattle and sheep estancias, the peons of the cotton and sugar plantations, the much-unemployed peons of the small towns, or the peonadas rurales. They are the chacareros, the dependent farmers. And last and most pitifully of all, they are the "abandoned people" of the northern provinces and territories. Of this last group I know only what I have read and what I have heard. Few Porteños, Cordobeses or pampa-reared Argentines know much about the north. Yet the poverty and destitution of these most-criollo, most-Argentine of all Argentines is said to go beyond the imagination.

These then are the little people. In the cities there is some trade unionism, a few loose gremio associations. For the rest there are no organizational bonds--no one to express their common thoughts and desires, no one to lead them in a campaign for betterment except a few brilliant college professors, liberal writers and orators with a flair for agitation and a knowledge of cute political tactics. Of those who have "gone to bat" for the little people, perhaps the best known is Alfredo Palacios. For many years Alfredo Palacios has compiled evidence on backward social conditions, has so realistically presented it to the National Congress and to the public at large that the Congress has had to approve legislation which he framed. Not at all satisfied with passing the legislation, Palacios has battled to make those laws operate, the most difficult task of all. Liberal middle class Argentines discount almost entirely--at least in the foreseeable future--the chance of the little people becoming an important force in the affairs of their country. They explain that history and tradition are against it, that the little people have no political "conciencia," which is to say that they have no ordered concept of what is going on, of what they really want and of the ideals in which they should believe. Politically, they contend, the little people are the easy tool of the two important political parties. To obtain their votes in an election all these two parties need do is to regale them with churrasco fiestas and cheap wine. Do you not know, I have been asked, that in an important sense our war against Spain was a war of "privilegio," a war for the interests of a class of our society? This aspect of our politics and our society, modified to be sure, is still with us. Adopt this verse from Martín Fierro to present-day Argentine society and you will understand better:

"El nada gana en la paz
"y es el primero en la guerra.
"..Y es necesario aguantar
"el rigor de su destino.
"El Gaucho no es Argentino
"sino pa hacerlo matar."

"First in war and last in peace. The Gaucho must suffer the hardships which fate imposes. Ah! But if there is killing to be done, what an Argentine the Gaucho

becomes!" That is not too good or literal translation of the verse, nor the official one, but it will serve to give the sense. Written about 1870, José Hernández's classic is perhaps the best single text-book of the Argentine.

For my part, I am not as pessimistic about the role which the little people of the Argentine will play as many Argentines are. It is because I have a faith in the native intelligence of many of these little people. It is not denied that the "conciencia," however slowly, is developing. The victory of the liberals in the recent election in the City of Buenos Aires would seem to indicate that the jornaleros, as well as the middle class, can be independent enough to upset precedent. The liberal party which won in Buenos Aires is the only one which keeps a hands-off attitude in elections. This party does not give churrasco and wine festivals, nor does it deliver people to the polls through a precinct-managed taxi service. In many parts of the Argentine where a party victory is a foregone conclusion, a protest vote in the form of blank ballots is becoming common--another sign of the developing "conciencia." There are many evidences of the "conciencia" in every day life. At Estancia El Deseado there was the young man who could read, and did read. There were only three or four of some seventy peons at the estancia who were practiced in this art. Each day he went to Urdampilleta to buy La Crítica, a leftist paper. From him alone, one could almost say, the peons had contact with the outside world. When the little people read, they read leftist papers, the most favored of which is La Crítica. There is a growing interest, I am sure, in the affairs of the world. I have seen middle-aged men standing by news bulletin boards with their school-age sons standing beside them and reading the news aloud to them. Although illiterate, they wanted to know how fared the warring nations.

Allow me to detail an incident related to a news bulletin board, for I think it will give some idea of the "conciencia" of the little people and will point out an affinity which--perhaps I imagine it--they have with Spain. One day I paused in front of the bulletin board of La Voz de La Interior. Often I stop, not so much to read the bulletins but to overhear the discussions which go on. Except in Buenos Aires where the policemen stand guard as a symbol of the State of Siege, the bulletin board is the site of the Argentine public forum. Anyone can speak his piece, or form part of the audience. The gathering on this occasion (one can easily tell by the dress) was composed almost entirely of jornaleros. The war was the topic. There were two principal debaters. The axis spokesman was short, stocky, blue-eyed and a clever master of Castilian. He said that the Axis Big Three stood for the people's cause because the axis kind of government had removed capital as the ruling force of their respective states. The corporate state, he said as he expanded his pretty theory, is a kind of socialism. Obviously, it was plain that the axis was not fighting an "imperialistic war." That was something only capitalistic countries could do. Indeed, he affirmed, it was the people of the axis countries who were fighting the war; for were not the millions of men in the armies of the axis of the people? (I do not pretend to know the "conciencia" of the jornaleros, but the debater was artful enough and it seemed that the appeal of socialism and the sovereign people and the indictment of capitalism carried weight with them.) The other debater, who appeared very much an average Argentine, made answer in this fashion: Call the axis system a kind of socialism if you will, but if you do, typify it as a qualified socialism--it is National Socialism. It has none of the ideals of real socialism; therefore it is not socialism. Neither Hitler nor Mussolini believe in the theories of Karl Marx. The axis armies cannot be called the people. In a totalitarian society an individual must toe the mark to almighty authority, more so even than under capitalism. In Germany almighty authority is Hitler. The orders and will of Hitler are carried out without question by the Nazi armies. Hence it is as logical to say that Hitler is the people as to say that his army is the people. Or, it would be the same to say that Franco is the people in Spain. Would you say that Franco is the people of Spain? That was the question which won the argument. Note how both speakers appealed to the crowd on the principles of socialism and the ideal of the sovereign people. If I judged the temper of that gathering, they were

sympathetic to a liberalism which meant change, and therefore hope. They did not like dictatorship of the axis brand. Neither did they have a favorable opinion of capitalism. But, for some reason, General Franco was a real person to them, more significant and more disliked even than Adolf Hitler.

In any event these little people, of the campo and the city, are to be taken into consideration. I am not disposed to discount the role which they are to play. Irrelevant as it may be to the subject at hand, there is a human charm to them which wins your heart. However poor or humble their vivienda is, if you visit it you are told that it is your house and that whatever is in it is yours to share. And when you leave, they bid you Godspeed with a beautiful phrase that an English translation treats most clumsily. Democracy, I should imagine, is relative. Having its degrees, it must needs have its imperfections. Perhaps that is why I see in Argentine democracy more than the concept of "privilegio," which some are so quick to ascribe to it. For did not José Hernández write, perhaps with some hope:

"Debe el Gaucho tener casa,
"escuela, iglesia y derechos.
"Y han de concluir algún día
"estos enriedos malditos."

"Gauchos should have homes, schools, churches and rights. Some day there must be an end to these damnable injustices."

Sincerely,

Francis Herron