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PART ONE: THE BACKGROUND

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1 THE RIVER PLATE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

On the map of South America the Viceroyalty of the River Plate, created in 1776, was a cohesive, compact territory which, from the Amazon Basin to Tierra del Fuego, and from the Pacific and the Andes to the River Plate and the Atlantic, included all the Spanish lands in this Southern corner of the Continent. It would be futile to look for such a coherent and compact structure in the actual geography of South America. On the contrary, if we were to trace the profile of the territory effectively governed and populated in this Southern outpost of the Spanish Empire, we would find a fragile and disjointed picture, in which the vicissitudes of two and a half centuries of colonisation were reflected. Of these, the more important were those that occurred at the beginning of the process. From that initial moment the River Plate region preserved characteristics which it was only to abandon very slowly, as a result of major structural crises, in the course of the nineteenth century. In the River Plate area, as throughout America, Spanish colonisation was superimposed on pre-Hispanic populations of sedentary agriculturalists, on the basis of which it was possible to erect a society both rural and hierarchical, following the model which the metropolis – in common with almost all Europe – was to adopt with increasing thoroughness in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

This tendency coincided with the exercise of a more strictly geographical option. In the greater part of Spanish America, lying in the Tropics, European immigration was on the whole orientated towards the high-altitude territories, where the climate was less adverse. In the River Plate region this geographical consideration was of less relevance. The existence of a settled native population was enough to lend the demographic – and consequently, the social and economic – structure of the region characteristics which it was only to lose in the course of the nineteenth century. There were two zones in the River Plate region where this first condition obtained: the vast interior, of extreme geographical complexity, and the Guaraní lands of Paraguay, Upper Paraná and Uruguay. In both these areas there arose centres of culture strongly marked by the admixture of Indian with Spanish traits, and differing from one another considerably.

Between these two areas of settlement stretched the Chaco and Pampa plains, and to the South the tableland of Patagonia. Both were populated by

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tribes of nomadic hunters. This central belt, which dominated the access to the immense River Plate system, came to constitute, for those Argentines who from the mid-nineteenth century became accustomed to thinking that geography imposed its influence on history, the 'natural' nucleus of the territory and of Argentine nationhood. However, this nucleus remained unpopulated for a long time. Of its extent, the Spaniards controlled only the territory necessary to maintain communications between Paraguay, the Interior and the Atlantic. From Córdoba, by way of the 'Santa Fe isthmus' and the 'Buenos Aires corridor' – expressions coined by two historians with a realistic outlook, Juan Álvarez and Emilio Coni, and which we may use to describe the Argentina of the first half of the nineteenth century – the narrow strip of effectively dominated lands included Buenos Aires ('the Port'), founded where Pedro de Mendoza found, in 1536, the first high ground on the swampy right bank of the River Plate. Buenos Aires had river communications along the Plate and the Paraná with the Northern nucleus of Asunción, Corrientes and Misiones. On the right bank of the Paraná, Santa Fe was the staging-post for direct trade between the Guaraní area and the Interior. Both navigation and trade were hazardous, and were not free, until well into the nineteenth century, from the attacks of the hostile Indians living on the right bank of the river North of Santa Fe.

To the East of the Paraná, Spanish rule was established late and with some difficulty. In Upper Paraná and Uruguay the Jesuit missions were a bulwark which, although obliged to yield gradually to Portuguese penetration, prevented a total collapse. Further South the Portuguese established themselves opposite Buenos Aires, in Colônia do Sacramento, which, for over a century of hazardous conflicts and truces, constituted an element of disintegration in the flank of the Spanish Empire.

This demographic structure concentrated on the high lands and the steppes of the Interior was reflected in an economy also orientated not towards the Atlantic but Northwards, towards the nucleus of Spanish power in South America – Peru. Buenos Aires, Colônia do Sacramento, Misiones and the Interior at first organised their economy to satisfy the requirements of Potosí, where there had arisen beside the mountain of silver, in a bitterly cold desert, one of the biggest cities in the world. For Potosí the Interior and Paraguay produced their cotton cloths, the Interior its wool, Paraguay and Misiones their *yerba mate*, and Buenos Aires, Santa Fe and the Interior their mules – to satisfy the insatiable demand of the mountain roads and the mine workings. Buenos Aires began life as a clandestine port for the silver of Potosí, as a miserable village through which a part of that wealth sought an illegal outlet to Europe; and when it began, Colônia do Sacramento aspired to become the centre of this forbidden trade.

This demographic and economic structure was challenged in the eighteenth century. The decay of Upper Peru as a silver-mining centre, the fall in the price of silver itself, as gold – which was again beginning to come in

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from Brazil – recovered its position as the dominant medium of exchange, had less influence on this crisis than did the consequences of the appearance of new economic and financial centres in Europe. These consequences were, above all, the destruction of the previously existing economic equilibria in the territories dominated – or about to be dominated – by European influence in America, Africa and Asia. Spanish America had achieved, although at the cost of maintaining an extremely slow rhythm of production and trade, a unitary structure, in which the inter-regional economic ties possessed a certain stability. The increased pressure from Europe dislocated this structure. The eighteenth century already saw the beginning of the phenomenon that was to reach its fullest manifestation in the following century: the disintegration of Spanish America into one-crop zones comparatively isolated from each other, with a producing and consuming market in Europe. Except in the regions that were capable of adapting themselves to this change, the consequences were bound to be either relative or absolute decline.

In the River Plate region it was the coastal lands which were the most liable to prosper in this new economic climate, and they did in fact experience a phenomenal boom. Thus circumstances suddenly became favourable to the Littoral, which had been relegated to obscurity and poverty for two centuries. The Interior, on the other hand, was less capable of adapting to the new economic climate. Its diversified and technically backward production was finding it increasingly difficult to retain its outlet in Upper Peru. Another market had appeared to complement the traditional one: that of Buenos Aires, now a populous and wealthy city. But in Buenos Aires, from 1778 onwards, it was to encounter competition from the traditional agriculture of Southern Europe, and, very soon, from the new European industries. The last decades of the eighteenth century, therefore, were an epoch of rapid rise for the Littoral region, of only partial and moderate rise, accompanied by painful readjustments, for the trade and the craft industry of the Interior, and for the latter's agriculture one of unalloyed disaster.

This inter-regional imbalance was only beginning. In any case, a general war and an interruption of Atlantic trade would be enough for the economic climate of the preceding age to be temporarily restored, for the economy of the River Plate region to seek again, spontaneously, trade with the North, for the old road – its route shown by ill-defined cart-tracks on the plains, and continued by mule-trains in the valleys and highlands – for the road that ran from Buenos Aires through Córdoba, Santiago, Tucumán and Salta, as far as Potosí and Lima, to become once again the vital artery of the region.

This slowly increasing imbalance, however, was only the initial moment of an irreversible process, which in the course of the nineteenth century was to reshape drastically the very fabric of the nation, and provide one of the keys

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to its tormented history: the rise of an Argentina based on the Littoral region, and the decline of the regions which, for two and a half centuries, had been the centre of Spanish life in this part of the Americas.

THE STABILITY OF THE INTERIOR

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there appears to have been – thanks to the circumstances of the world war – a truce in the incipient rivalry between the Littoral and the Interior, in a climate of moderate prosperity that affected, though in differing degrees, both regions. But the Littoral and the Interior only appear as homogeneous entities when we contrast one with the other; examined separately, they manifest both variety and internal fissures, minor contradictions within the major one.

The Interior is the vast zone stretching to the East of the Andes, from the tableland of Upper Peru to the point where the Southern and Eastern outcrops of the Pampa range are lost in the plains. This region, more uniform than unified, spreads Northwards into the Humahuaca Valley:

> This is really the frontier of Peru: whereas one side of a mountain is bare of all vegetation and has all the appearance of solitude and aridity typical of Peru, the other side is covered with greenery...Everything seems to portend a very different country to that which one has left.[1]

But the principal characteristic of the Interior is not fertility. In its mountains, valleys and plains the fertile zone is limited to that irrigated by the streams and rivers which come down from the mountains, and indeed the broader plains are really steppe-land, with large stretches of desert. This barely remediable sterility was hardly noticed by the observers of the first half of the nineteenth century, for the limitations imposed by the scarcity of human and technical resources distracted attention from those imposed by Nature.

In the North the parallel mountain chains stretch between the Atacama tableland, a continuation of the Upper Peruvian plateau and a complete desert, and the Chaco plain. Between these two features the mountain ranges enclose long parallel valleys. To the East, the descent towards the Chaco plain consists of well-watered slopes, the settlement of which was then only just beginning. This was the jurisdictional area of Salta, the geographical uniqueness of which was accompanied by a social structure with characteristics also unique in the River Plate area. A *mestizo* (of mixed Indian and Spanish blood) lower class, identified as Indian by the criterion in force in Colonial Spanish America, which superimposed and confused racial and social characteristics, was ruled by an arrogant and wealthy aristocracy, which lent the city of Salta a splendour unknown in the rest of the River Plate area. This aristocracy owned the land, which was divided into great estates, devoted in the low-lying areas to wheat-growing and

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viticulture and on the high ground to livestock-raising. Still preserving the same characteristics, Salta spread outwards towards the Chaco plains. Orán was founded and became the nucleus of a settlement that necessitated a stubborn defence against the displaced Indians. Behind the line of forts, on the hillsides sloping down to the Chaco, tropical crops were grown, principally sugar which, tried unsuccessfully in the seventeenth century in the lowlands of Jujuy, enjoyed a boom from 1778 onwards. Sugar from the valley of San Francisco de Jujuy, within the jurisdiction of Salta, figured as early as 1805, together with Brazilian sugar, in the import and export statistics of Tucumán.[2]

Between the desert plateau and the tropical lowlands stretched the estates of some of the big landlords of Salta. The inventory of the possessions of one of them, Don Nicolás Severo de Isasmendi,[3] gives us a clear idea of a great Salta estate at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It included five big landholdings, of which the biggest, Calchaquí, had a soap-factory, warehouses and wine-presses, a still for the manufacture of *aguardiente*, two mills, 3,700 vines, storehouses with 1,400 yards of shirting material imported from Peru, 480 bushels of wheat and 350 of wine. Surrounding the landlord's domain were the lands of the Indians, with 70 tenants. Three of the landholdings, situated in the mountains instead of in the valley, were devoted to stock-raising: the hunting of vicuñas, guanacos and deer, and the raising of cattle and sheep. The landlord's house at Calchaquí, with its chapel, stood in its own square. Around it a small village had grown up, and in the house, as a discreet symbol of the landlord's power, there were 'a pair of handcuffs and a chain with two shackles'. The town house, as was frequently the case among the wealthy classes of Salta, had damask hangings and furniture inlaid with silver and gold.

This landowning aristocracy also dominated Salta's trade. At the edge of the city there was held an annual mule fair, 'the biggest in the world' according to Concolorcorvo,[4] who was able to see it before the caste war in Peru provoked a decline from which Salta only recovered at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Through it passed the mules of the old-established breeders of Buenos Aires, and those of newer ones of the Interior. They spent the winter season in the pastures near the city, before embarking on the final stage of the journey. The mule-market of Salta, which before the rebellions witnessed the passage of 70,000 mules a year, began to recover around 1795. During the following five years there was already an annual average of 30,000 mules being traded in Salta, and in 1803 the figure was 50,000.[5] This recovery, both hesitant and slow, provoked by the increased demand from a Peru that had lost its entire stock of mules, kept prices unusually high. The local consequence of this fact was the increasing prosperity of the cattle-dealers of the city, 'the Saravias, the Arias, the Castellanos and the Puchs'.[6]

These are the very names that we find in the registries of landed

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property in Salta. The Salta aristocracy thus enjoyed a concentration of economic power unequalled in the River Plate region, and counted among its numbers the richest man to be found on the route between Buenos Aires and Lima, the Marquis of the Valle de Tojo. This prosperous sector had only recently reached its zenith. It had been the reorientation towards the Atlantic of the entire commerce of Spanish South America that had increased the commercial importance of Salta, and more than one of its great families would have been unable to trace its origin beyond the second half of the eighteenth century, when that reorientation took place. It was the Basque, and generally Northern Spanish, dynasties, which were to play such an important part in the history of Salta in the nineteenth century: the Gurruchagas, the Uriburus, the Puchs, the Gorritis.[7]

The process of ascent of these families followed a remarkably uniform pattern. The founders of those dynasties, who had arrived in Salta either as government officials or as merchants, generally all became merchants anyway. The acquisition of land was almost always achieved by marriage with women from older families. It is, furthermore, significant that the latter were always so ready to intermarry with upstart Spanish immigrants. Doubtless mercantile wealth contributed thus to activate the rhythm of exploitation of rural Salta.

This dominant group of such recent formation nevertheless conceived of itself as being ancient and well consolidated. Its economic hegemony was accompanied by a social prestige that appeared unshakable. Social differentiation was based – in Salta more systematically than in the rest of the River Plate region – on ethnic differences. If the *mestizo* lower class appeared to be characterised by a resigned and blinkered obedience, the white aristocracy viewed with still greater suspicion the few border-line figures which the urban structure allowed, despite every precaution, to rise in the social scale. It attributed to them a servile origin, perpetuated by the inheritance of African blood, which in the absence of other more visible signs would always manifest itself in a secret mark preserved by even the lightest-skinned mulattoes. The aristocracy of Salta made successful efforts to defend itself from the 'red-tails' and their attempts at social-climbing. A hidden tension was the result of this excessively polarised social structure: in Salta, before it happened in any other area of the River Plate, and with more intensity than anywhere else, the revolution against the King acquired the characteristics of a social struggle. It was a struggle, however, with ephemeral results: in the mid-nineteenth century – without quoting more recent testimony – Salta was again a province where 'there are no masses';[8] the tribute-paying *mestizo* lower class simply did not count.

The territory of Salta ended where the Andean foothills joined a massive range, that of Aconquija, a chain separating Tucumán and Catamarca. This mountain chain, with its high snow-capped peaks, provided Tucumán with an exceptionally rich and dense river network, which had

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created a subtropical oasis of long-standing prosperity, based principally on commerce and craft industries. The city of Tucumán was the nerve centre of the route between Buenos Aires and Peru, and a prosperous group of merchants owed its wealth to this decisive factor. It was they who acquired the greatest prestige in a region where ownership of the land was comparatively widely distributed. The city contained a large number of craftsmen, who used as material the hard woods that the zone produced naturally in its virgin forests (whereas on the steppes and in the temperate oases, as also in the Littoral region, the trees tended to be of softwood) and manufactured carts, used on the highway at the side of which the city had grown. More typical of the countryside was tanning: in the smallholdings the proprietors installed tanneries for the hides of their own cattle and of those which they went to fetch from other regions on behalf of the dealers, the principal merchants of the city. Thus this activity, which brought in an income of thirty thousand pesos a year, was controlled by 'ten or twelve individuals', and of that income, only seven thousand pesos found their way into the hands of the 'poor tanners'.[9] Livestock-raising (cattle, horses and mules for Peru) and agriculture (rice, exported to the entire Viceroyalty) were orientated towards trade, as was a small tallow and soap industry. Domestic weaving, the occupation of the peasant population, did not satisfy the local needs even of ordinary cloth, which was partly imported from Peru.

Such an economic structure guaranteed the social hegemony of those who controlled the marketing of products and were able to make the necessary financial advances to maintain production. It is no coincidence that twelve years after the Revolution one of the political leaders of Tucumán, Javier López, who was, besides, owner of land that gave him influence over the mountain populations of the West, should proclaim himself ready to 'leave the counter to unsheath the sword', or that – even thirty years later – the province was still governed by an oligarchy whose members were identified by their ownership of shops in the main square.[10]

To the South-East of Tucumán, Santiago del Estero was an extremely poor region: an American Galicia, as miserable and dirty as the Spanish one, in the words of General Iriarte.[11] Like Galicia, Santiago was, within the demographic equilibrium of the River Plate region, a kind of inexhaustible centre of high pressures. As temporary or definitive emigrants, the people of Santiago were an indispensable human base for all the agricultural enterprises of the Littoral region. In their inhospitable land, formed by two long and narrow parallel oases – those of the River Dulce and the River Salado – which separated the steppe from the Chaco forest, they had to defend against the Indians an over-extended frontier, inadequately protected by a sparse line of forts. In the city and on the farms beside the rivers the dominant activities were commerce and agriculture. The latter was divided between maize for local consumption, and wheat for shipment

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to other more prosperous regions with a higher demand. A very backward form of cattle-raising went on on the steppes, while to the East and West, in the Chaco forest and in the desert strip, an unstable population lived by collecting wild honey and beeswax in the forest (products that counted for more than one would expect today, at a time when sugar was expensive and scarce, and religious worship played such an important part in the life of the community), and cochineal from the desert. The first two products were primarily for export, while the third was mostly destined to be used as a dye for the woollen fabrics produced in the region.

In this desperately poor region domestic weaving flourished. While the men abandoned the land, the women wove wool on domestic looms. In the case of local consumers and also of sales to the Littoral, geographical proximity, as well as the prevailing poverty, made it possible for Santiago – and for the highlands of Córdoba – to compete in this market with the products of the Peruvian Indian workshops, offering to the poorest customers cloth and ponchos of which the principal merit was their low price. This production, like honey, beeswax and cochineal gathering in the border areas, was entirely dominated by the merchants of the city of Santiago, who were frequently proprietors in the irrigated zones, where, however, property was too widely distributed for a hegemonic landed class to emerge. Moreover, these merchants received the greater part of the income, modest enough if compared with other cities on the same route, but substantial in the local context, derived from Santiago's situation on the road to Peru.

To the South of Santiago the road led to Córdoba. Founded in the place where the foothills give way to the fertile Pampa, the city extended its jurisdiction Northwards and Westwards, through a land of steppe, valley and mountain, and (more hesitantly) Southwards, towards the Pampa, a region which it had to conquer from the Indians and subsequently defend against their counter-attacks. Córdoba had a long agricultural past, which went back, strictly speaking, to the pre-Hispanic period, but at the beginning of the nineteenth century it was affected by an offshoot of the stock-raising boom that was causing a profound transformation of the Littoral area. The upper class was closely connected with this expanding economic activity. Their lands were to be found less in the South and East, whose possibilities were only discovered in the second half of the century, than in the plains and steppes of the North. The rise of the stock-raisers did not signify a division within the oligarchy which dominated the city and the region, but it was, rather, a reorientation of the economic activities of its members, who came to prefer stock-raising to the more traditional urban commerce. The latter was not, however, neglected; the bulk of the income of this sector appears to have been derived from the hill region – where property was more divided, and more orientated towards agriculture and minor stock-raising – and domestic weaving offered an additional source of income to the destitute rural population, which subsisted thanks to the

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advances of the merchants, who went the rounds of the 'hills and dales' selling to the weavers on credit, and collecting their debts when the work had been done. In their reports to the *consulado* (official guild of merchants) in Buenos Aires these 'merchants and promoters' continually speak of their rural expeditions to encourage 'the manufacture of cloths for ponchos, coarse friezes, cloaks and blankets'.[12] On another page of the same ledger we find one of these self-sacrificing paladins acting with extreme harshness against three supposed debtors, old peasant women who had not delivered him the cloth demanded in payment of monetary advances (which were, in any case, only vaguely described).

The hill-country of Córdoba was – like Santiago – a land from which people emigrated. We find people of that origin throughout the rural areas of Buenos Aires, both in the villages where the cart-drivers lived and also in the agricultural centres.

The upper class which dominated the hill-country through its control of commerce, and owned the best stock-raising lands on the northern steppes, was also predominant in the city. The rival families vied with each other tenaciously for the highest secular, ecclesiastical and academic appointments, and they involved Intendants and bishops in a complex network of intrigue. This hegemony became even more firmly established after the expulsion of the Jesuits. There is no doubt that the other Orders were, as a result of that measure, rescued from total insignificance, but their rise was not enough to fill the void left by the expelled Jesuits. Their absence provoked a particularly marked decline of large-scale agricultural exploitation effected with adequate resources, which they had carried out on their estates with large numbers of slaves. The expulsion thus anticipated changes which in other parts of the country took place only later: the existence of a ruling class that was simultaneously very rich and very poor – rich in land, poor in money – which a present-day scholar, H. S. Ferns, considers to be one of the most original features of Argentine history of the nineteenth century, and which was in fact to lend a peculiar tone to the stock-raising Littoral, was already noticeable in Córdoba.

At this point the Peruvian route at last enters the Littoral area. That route, and the traffic along it, were what gave birth to this Eastern sector of the Interior. In so far as that commerce was able to continue in the face of the economic restructuring provoked by the introduction of 'free trade'* into the Spanish Empire, this area maintained its prosperity intact until 1810. Obviously, this continuity was unable to conceal the symptoms of future danger. The commercial Interior was increasingly becoming an intermediary between Peru and the Atlantic port. The export and marketing of local products was given an increasingly lower priority, and free trade was partly responsible for the acceleration of this process. But there appears to be no doubt that at the same time free trade intensified inter-regional

* That is, open trade between all parts of the Spanish Empire.

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