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0521771854 - Between Revolution and the Ballot Box: The Origins of the Argentine
Radical Party in the 1890s

Paula Alonso

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), usually known as the Radical Party, is the oldest national political party in Argentina and one of two parties that have dominated Argentine politics during the twentieth century. Founded in 1891 to confront the Partido Autonomista Nacional (PAN), a coalition that had controlled Argentine politics since 1880, the UCR won its first presidential election in 1916, ending thirty-six years of continuous PAN political predominance. During its early years the Radical Party was led by Leandro Alem and fought the PAN with all methods available – words, votes, and guns – becoming the country’s most destabilizing opposition force. After Alem’s death in 1896, the party entered into rapid decline and by the turn of the century had disbanded. Hipólito Yrigoyen, Alem’s nephew, began the reconstruction of the party in 1903, building on the ruins of the old political organization and winning the presidency in 1916.

This book focuses on the origins and development of the Radical Party at the end of the nineteenth century, from the party’s foundation in 1891 until its decline at the end of the decade. Little is known about the formative years of the Radical Party. Traditionally, historians have divided turn-of-the-century Argentina into two periods: 1880 to 1916, when the country was under the restrictively democratic PAN regime; and 1916–1930, when the Radical Party came to power, inaugurating a democratic period under universal suffrage with secret and compulsory voting – an era put to an end by the first military coup the country experienced in the twentieth century. As a central component of the country’s political history, the UCR has received much attention from historians.¹ However, most accounts have concentrated on the period after 1916, and the earlier, formative years of the Radical Party have received only a few brief and introductory remarks. Not only has this precluded any clear understanding of the origins of the party, but it has

1 A listing of most works on the party’s history runs to more than 800 titles. C. Giacabone and E. Gallo, *Manual bibliográfico sobre la Unión Cívica Radical*, Buenos Aires, 1989.

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also tended anachronistically to join together the development and nature of the UCR in the 1890s with those of the party in the second decade of the twentieth century as if there were no significant distinctions between the two.

In fact, there was little continuity between these two periods of the party's history. Certain features of the original UCR survived well into the twentieth century: the party's moralistic rhetoric, its form of internal organization, and its persistent refusal to coalesce with other political forces. However, the Radical Party was originally founded by a group of men with common purposes, who gave the party a specific identity and employed a distinctive political discourse. Their agreed party strategy comprised constant criticism of the government, electoral competition, revolutionary uprisings, and congressional opposition. Most of these features had disappeared by the time Yrigoyen took over the leadership of the UCR.² By then the founding leaders had, for the most part, died, abandoned the party for other political forces, or retired from political life altogether. When he began the reconstruction of the UCR, Yrigoyen sought to ensure a sense of continuity through the use of old party symbols. But most of the national figures of the old guard refused to join him. Yrigoyen's leadership conferred a new and distinctive identity on the party; his elusive and discreet character contrasted sharply with the confrontational personality of Alem. There were important differences in party strategy too: Whereas under Alem's leadership the Radical Party had regularly competed in elections in the federal capital and the Province of Buenos Aires, the party's two main strongholds, the tactic of abstaining from elections in protest at unfair electoral conditions became Yrigoyen's main party banner. Under Yrigoyen's leadership the UCR abstained from contesting elections until secret and compulsory voting was introduced in 1912. The political contexts of the original and later Radical parties were also very different. In the twentieth century, Argentine politics became more fragmented. The first decade of the century saw a return to the high rates of economic growth and immigration that Argentina had experienced before the economic crisis of 1890, and this socio-economic transformation increasingly influenced the country's political life. Economic and social interests founded organizations to represent themselves or used more consistently the ones already created in the late nineteenth century. Socio-economic factors became more relevant

2 It could be argued that Yrigoyen also continued with the original UCR's revolutionary banner as he inaugurated the reorganization of the party with the launching of a revolution in 1905. It has generally been agreed, however, that Yrigoyen was not a great enthusiast for uprisings and that he organized the revolution of 1905 with the sole intention of using it as propaganda for the reorganization of the party and to attract the Radical old guard.

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to the voting preferences of the electorate and the composition of political parties. The sons of immigrants began to participate in politics and their support represented a significant component of the twentieth-century UCR.³

The focus of this study on the formative years of the UCR not only can help us to highlight the contrast with and similarities to the party in subsequent years; more significant, it can provide us with a better understanding of the nature of the party at the time of its foundation and of the political dynamics of late nineteenth-century Argentina as a whole. The 1890s was a central period for the birth of Argentina's party system. The decade witnessed not only the organization of the UCR but also of the Socialist Party, two organizations that opposed the PAN and also survived it. As the strongest opposition party in the 1890s, the UCR had profound and long-lasting effects in shaping Argentina's political culture and defining its party system.⁴ The Radical Party had a number of characteristics, including a vociferous rhetoric, the outspoken defense of the use of violence, a perception of the political realm as inhabited by a corrupt government that contrasted with their own moral purity, and a refusal to collaborate with the PAN or any other political party. These characteristics polarized politics in the 1890s, creating a irreconcilable confrontation between government and opposition. The creation of the UCR produced a party development in turn-of-the-century Argentina very different from that for which the leading members of the PAN had hoped. Instead of one-party domination where politics was reduced to competition between factions, or a gradual formation of a party system deriving from the alternation in power of conservative political forces, the formation of the Radical Party produced in the 1890s a system of political contestation, competition, and confrontation. In turn, this had long-lasting effects. The party was establishing the basis for a long tradition in Argentina in which any cooperation or conciliation between the UCR and other political forces or between government and opposition became virtually impossible, or at least highly difficult. The Radicals' belief that they could never

3 Ezequiel Gallo and Silvia Sigal, "La formación de los partidos políticos contemporáneos: La Unión Cívica Radical (1890–1916)," *Desarrollo Económico*, April–September, 1963, Vol. 3, N. 1–2, pp. 212–222; Richard Walter, "Elections in the City of Buenos Aires during the First Yrigoyen Administration: Social Class and Political Preference," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, N. 58 (4), 1978, pp. 595–624.

4 The term political culture is used here as defined by K.M. Baker, in the "Introduction" to *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, Oxford and New York, 1987, pp. xi–xiii. Political culture refers to the set of discourses and practices that characterizes politics, understood as the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce the competing claims they make on one another.

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reconcile their principles with those of any other party set the scene for a durable political culture in Argentina of exclusive (one-party) government.⁵

The standard interpretation of the 1880–1916 period has portrayed politics as being closely controlled by a tight oligarchy led by the PAN. The PAN came into power in 1880, reinforced the state-building process that had begun with the Constitution of 1853, and embarked the country on a remarkable economic and social transformation at the turn of the century, converting Argentina into a leading world exporter of meat and grains. Progressive in their economics, the leaders of the PAN have been described as highly conservative politically. Consolidating a restrictive democratic system, the PAN kept the reins of power in their hands, impeding the rise of opposition parties through the manipulation of elections and controlling the succession of all presidents and most elected posts of the 1880–1916 period. The standard view also emphasizes that when in the 1880s the leaders of the PAN began the modernization process, they sowed the seeds of their own destruction. The social effect of the modernization process was the emergence of new social forces, but the landed oligarchy that composed the PAN refused to share power with them. However, the pressure to open up the political system forced them to enact the electoral reform legislation in 1912. To an already existing male universal suffrage was added secret and compulsory voting, thus including all Argentine males into the political system and making the electoral process more transparent.⁶

In this prevalent view of Argentina's politics, the Radical Party is portrayed as representative of the newly emerged social forces, the political face of the modernization process.⁷ Although some of its leaders belonged to the elite, the party is said to have represented the middle classes, a segment estimated to have grown rapidly between the two national census of 1865 and 1895, a group ready and anxious to exercise some influence on the politics of the country. The Radical Party then channeled the political demands of this new class, fighting for electoral reform to put an end to the antiquated political system and to begin a new era of modern representative democracy.

This standard interpretation of Argentine history and of the founding

5 See Ezequiel Gallo, "Traditions and political styles in Argentina," *The St. Michael's Meeting*, Maryland 1979, p. 28.

6 This standard interpretation has been formulated in the now classic G. Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición: De la sociedad tradicional a la sociedad de masas*, Buenos Aires, 1965, and J.L. Romero, *Historia de la ideas políticas en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1946. Most works have followed this prevalent view.

7 See, for example, Gallo, "La formación"; D. Rock, *Politics in Argentina 1890–1930: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism*, Cambridge, 1975.

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of the Radical Party has received few challenges.⁸ Most of the concerns of historians have related to how best to label the social groups that the UCR was supposed to represent. The list of the different social groups thought to have been the core of the new party is a long one: It includes the *petite bourgeoisie*,⁹ the middle class,¹⁰ the lower classes or popular sectors,¹¹ a combination of the last two groups,¹² the creoles, the immigrant masses, and the popular sectors,¹³ the city merchants and the young,¹⁴ the elite,¹⁵ a faction of the elite allied with middle-class

8 There has not been a complete review of the whole 1880–1916. A good introduction to this period can be found in Ezequiel Gallo, “Argentina: Society and Politics, 1880–1916,” in L. Bethell (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, Vol. V, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 359–392. One of the finest works on the institutional dynamics of the period still remains N. Botana, *El orden conservador: La política argentina entre 1880–1916*, Buenos Aires, 1977; for the best analysis on the political and economic thought of the 1880–1910 years, see the preliminary study of N. Botana and E. Gallo, *De la República posible a la República verdadera (1880–1910)*, Buenos Aires, 1997, pp. 13–123. For a critical view of works such as Cantón, Gallo and Sigal, Smith, and Remmer that analyze the social basis of the representatives in Congress, see E. Zimmermann, *Los liberales reformistas: La cuestión social en la Argentina, 1890–1916*, Buenos Aires, 1995, pp. 29–35. Cantón, *El Parlamento Argentino en épocas de cambio, 1890, 1916 y 1946*, Buenos Aires, 1966; Gallo “La formación”; P. Smith, *Argentina and the Failure of Democracy: Conflict among Political Elites, 1904–1955*, Madison, 1974; K. Remmer, *Party Competition in Argentina and Chile: Recruitment and Public Policy, 1890–1930*, Lincoln, 1984. In recent years there has been an increasing number of articles that have challenged some aspects of the standard interpretations of the 1880–1916 period on topics like elections and political participation of both Argentines and immigrants. For a review of these works, see P. Alonso, “La nueva historia política de la argentina del ochenta al centenario,” *Anuario ibes*, N. 13, 1998, pp. 393–419.

9 L. Sommi, *La Revolución del 90*, Buenos Aires, 1957, p. 336.

10 F. Luna, “UCR. Historia de su pensamiento. El Radicalismo de ayer y de hoy,” *Todo es Historia*, N. 289, July 1991, pp. 8–10; P. Snow, *Argentine Radicalism*, Iowa, 1965, p. 14, and also his “The Radical Parties of Chile and Argentina,” Ph.D., diss., University of Virginia, 1963, p. 263; T.F. McGann, *Argentina, the United States and the Inter-American System, 1880–1914*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957, p. 53, and his *Argentina: The Divided Land*, New Jersey, 1966, p. 33; J.J. Johnson, *Political Change in Latin America*, Stanford, 1958, p. 98; a similar interpretation, although using indicators of modernization, can be found in Gallo and Sigal, “La formación,” pp. 173–230.

11 A. Díaz de Molina, *La oligarquía argentina: Su filiación y su régimen (1848–1898)*, Buenos Aires, 1972, pp. 347–668; J.F. Sívori, *Fundación de la Unión Cívica Radical*, Buenos Aires, 1959, pp. 13–16; H.H. Gómez, *Significación histórica del radicalismo*, Buenos Aires, 1946, p. 8; H. Guido, *Secuelas del unicato. 1890–1896*, Buenos Aires, no date, p. 95.

12 L.A. Romero, “El Surgimiento y la llegada al poder,” in L.A. Romero et al., *El Radicalismo*, Buenos Aires, 1969, pp. 16–17.

13 J.L. Romero, *Historia de las ideas políticas en Argentina*, Buenos Aires (new edition), 1975, pp. 210–216.

14 D.W. Richmond, *Carlos Pellegrini and the Crisis of the Argentine Elites, 1880–1916*, New York, 1989, p. 40.

15 L. Allub, *Orígenes del autoritarismo en América Latina*, Buenos Aires, 1983, p. 106. For J.A. Ramos, the 1890s was Buenos Aires’s oligarchic counter-revolution against the national forces of the PAN; see his *Revolución y contrarevolución en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1965, Vol. 1, pp. 309–399; and his *Del patriarcado a la oligarquía. 1862–1904*, Buenos Aires, 1982, pp. 134–282.

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sectors;¹⁶ and all social groups previously excluded from the political scene.¹⁷ Basically, while some historians have placed more emphasis on the coalition of middle-class sectors with a section of the elite, others have opted to stress the lower classes and popular sectors as the main components of the party's support. Some historians on the left, on the other hand, have accused the UCR of being a party comprised of the elite, indifferent toward the unprivileged and lower classes.¹⁸

Another set of historians' concerns has been related to the content and definition of the main political principles espoused by the Radical Party. The standard view has portrayed the UCR as a party that morally rejected the existing political system and fought for modern notions of representative democracy against a PAN which was hostile to this goal. Having remained silent on economic matters, the party has been identified as the agent of modernization of political practices in Argentina.¹⁹ It has also been argued that there were no sharp ideological distinctions between the UCR and the PAN. The Radicals' limited goals were consistent with the standard Argentine liberal creed and the UCR was not interested in fundamental institutional, political, and/or social changes.²⁰ Only a few works have deviated from this trend and attempted to portray the UCR as a party aiming to produce a social revolution in Argentina²¹ or as a nationalist party, the representative of the "American tradition" – "the indigenous roots" hostile to a "Europeanized oligarchy."²²

16 Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, p. 32; Gallo, "La formación."

17 D. Cantón, *El parlamento argentino en épocas de cambio: 1890, 1916 y 1946*, Buenos Aires, 1966, p. 19; R. Botnick, *Yrigoyen y el primer movimiento*, Buenos Aires, 1989, pp. 19–28; W. Peralta and A. Blanco, *La Unión Cívica Radical, 1890–1916*, Buenos Aires, 1917, p. 19.

18 See, for example, Allub, *Orígenes del autoritarismo*, 106; R. Puiggrós, *Historia crítica de los partidos políticos*, Buenos Aires, 1956, pp. 90–102; Abelardo Ramos, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en la Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1965, Vol. I, p. 378, and *Del patriciado a la oligarquía, 1862–1904*, Buenos Aires, 1982, pp. 134–204.

19 See, for example, Rock, *Politics in Argentina*; Gallo, "La formación"; Sommi, *La Revolución*, p. 160; Díaz de Molina, *La oligarquía argentina*, pp. 347–668; Guido, *Secuelas*, p. 95; Romero, *Historia de las ideas*, pp. 181–226; Cantón, *El parlamento*, p. 19; Sívori, *La fundación*, pp. 13–16; Gómez, *Significación*, p. 8; Puiggrós, *Historia crítica*, pp. 90–102; Botnick, *Yrigoyen*, p. 19; Romero, "El surgimiento," pp. 17–18, 22; G. Del Mazo, *El Radicalismo: Ensayo sobre su historia y doctrina*, Buenos Aires, 1957, Vol. 1, pp. 56–59.

20 O. Cornblit, "La opción conservadora en la política argentina," *Desarrollo Económico*, Vol. 14, N. 56, 1975, pp. 603–628; C.A. Cabral, *Alem, Informe sobre la frustración argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1967, pp. 22, 29; E. Gallo, "El Roquismo: 1880–1916," *Todo es Historia*, N. 100, September 1975, p. 27; Remmer, *Party Competition*, pp. 27–31; M. Szuchman, *Mobility and Integration in Urban Argentina: Córdoba in the Liberal Era*, Austin and London, 1980, p. 174; Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, p. 44; Gallo and Sigal, "La formación," pp. 179–187; P. Smith, *Argentina and the Failure of Democracy: Conflict among Political Elites, 1904–1955*, Madison, Wisconsin, 1974, p. 9; A.M. Mustapic, "Conflictos institucionales durante el primer gobierno radical: 1916–1922," *Desarrollo Económico*, Vol. 24, N. 93 (April–June), 1984, pp. 85–108.

21 Richmond, *Carlos Pellegrini*, p. 41.

22 R.J. Alexander, *Latin American Political Parties*, New York, 1973, pp. 82–83.

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Under the standard interpretation, the UCR made a profound impact on Argentina's political system. The foundation of the party in the 1890s signaled the birth of modern political parties in Argentina and the UCR has often been portrayed as the major contributor to the country's political development.²³ Against this view, it has also been argued that a competitive political system did not arise until after 1912,²⁴ that 1890 was the epilogue of 1880 rather than the prologue to 1912,²⁵ and that the UCR was, in its formative period, a political failure as it did not succeed in producing any significant changes in social and political structures.²⁶ Nevertheless, most accounts of the Radical Party have insisted in portraying the party as uniquely responsible for the introduction of modern democracy in Argentina.²⁷

Most works on this period share a view of Argentine history as a dichotomy between a landed oligarchy and a newly emerged middle class, between a party fighting for modern notions of representative democracy and a reactionary alternative: the PAN. In this light, history tends to divide into oppressors and oppressed, oligarchs and democrats, conservatives and modernisers, corruption and moral purity. But to remove the history of the Radical Party from its proper political context in this way and to assume that the UCR was the "agent of modernization" of Argentina's political traditions is to distort the concerns and aims of its members and to oversimplify the country's political history.

There are many explanations for the persistence of this standard interpretation of this period of Argentine history in general, and of the nature of the UCR in particular. There has been a remarkable absence of detailed studies on the political parties, not only of the formative period of the UCR, but also of the PAN and of the Socialist Party.²⁸ In the particular case of the Radical Party, as already mentioned, historians have

23 O. Cornblit and E. Gallo, "La generación del ochenta y su proyecto: Antecedentes y consecuencias," *Desarrollo Económico*, January–March 1962, Vol. 1, N. 4, pp. 24; J. Bianco, *La doctrina Radical*, Buenos Aires, 1927, p. 19. Luna, "UCR," pp. 10–11; Del Mazo, *El Radicalismo*, p. 21; Peralta, *La Unión Cívica Radical*, p. 7; A.R. Calviño, *La crisis de 1890 a través del Congreso: La preparación hasta 1889*, Buenos Aires, 1989, p. 7.

24 The most explicit interpretation of this argument can be found in Remmer, *Party Competition*, p. 33.

25 H. Sabato, "La Revolución del 90: Prólogo o epílogo," *Punto de vista*, September 1990, pp. 27–31; Ramos, *Revolución y contrarrevolución*, Vol. I, pp. 313–397; and his *Del patriacado*, pp. 169–204.

26 Richmond, *Carlos Pellegrini*, p. 41; Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, p. 44.

27 See, for example, Del Mazo, *El radicalismo*; Sommi, *La Revolución*.

28 While the history of the PAN still awaits to be written, the main work on the Socialist Party continues to be R. Walter, *The Socialist Party in Argentina, 1890–1930*, Texas, 1977. The remarkable absence of studies of the political parties of the period had been noticed by E. Gallo, "Historiografía política: 1880–1900," Comité Internacional de Ciencias Históricas (Comité Argentino), *Historiografía Argentina (1958–1988). Una evaluación crítica de la producción histórica Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1990, pp. 332–333.

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focused their attention on the period beginning in 1916, devoting only a few introductory paragraphs to the party's founding years, and assuming an ill-grounded continuation of leadership, purposes, strategies, and nature. It also cannot be ignored that the UCR is a party that even today plays a major role in the country's political system, and its history has been many times reconstructed to fulfil partisan needs.²⁹ Also, the name "Radical" seems to have led historians to concentrate on its innovative aspects. This has produced two different results. Some historians have emphasized everything that was new about the Radicals, attributing to the party aims and beliefs of which its members were hardly aware.³⁰ Others, however, disappointed at the limited changes the Radicals aimed for, have belittled the significance of the formative period of the party.³¹

This book argues that the UCR was not created to represent any particular social sector. There were no differences in social class between the leading members of the UCR and those of other political organizations. The socio-economic characteristics of the Buenos Aires electorate seems to have played no decisive role in the voting preferences of UCR supporters of the 1890s. The discourse of the leaders of the Radical Party shows no aspiration to represent a particular social class, and UCR congressmen of the 1890s manifested no particular concern for "the social question" or for any particular social or economic sector. Against the traditional interpretations, it is also argued that the ideology of the UCR had a specific content. Based on a few printed party manifestos, previous works have tended to reduce the UCR's ideology to vague and moralistic formulations of a fight for democracy, decentralization of power, and clean administrative procedures. Furthermore, previous works have also ascribed to the vocabulary used by the party anachronistic interpretations, imposing on the UCR a set of aims party leaders did not have. These works, therefore, fail to recognize that what is important is not so much the words employed in political discourse, but the meaning of these words in the vocabulary of a group or society, the nature and range of the criteria in which these words are employed, and the circumstances in which they have been used.³²

29 Most works on the UCR have been written by members of the Radical Party, the main examples being Del Mazo's *El radicalismo*, the 8 volumes of *Mensaje y Destino*, Buenos Aires, 1946, and the 12 volumes of *Pueblo y Gobierno*, Buenos Aires, 1956. See also the listing of works on the UCR in Giacabone, *Manual bibliográfico*.

30 See, for example, Aramburu, "Historia," pp. 153–162; Richmond's suggestion that Alem sought for a "social revolution" and that the Radicals campaigned for electoral reform, *Carlos Pellegrini*, pp. 40–41; Sommi's classical interpretation of the UCR's goal of modern democracy, *La Revolución*, p. 160.

31 The main examples of this are Remmer, *Party Competition*, p. 33; Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, p. 44.

32 Quentin Skinner, "Language and Political Change," in T. Ball and J. Farr (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 6–23.

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The main objective of this book is to offer a detailed history of the UCR in the 1890s and, through it, to provide a clearer understanding of the politics of late nineteenth-century Argentina. The book places the formation of the UCR in its historical context, describes how and why the party was organized, and assesses its impact on the country's political development. The book also examines other previously neglected aspects of the party's history. The UCR of those years acted on different fronts. It actively participated in the public debate concerning the country's political, institutional, and economic past, present, and future that took place in the political press. It also contested elections in the city and Province of Buenos Aires with significant success, exercised an active opposition in Congress, organized a series of uprisings threatening the constitutional order, and gained public support with its fiery rhetoric and public calls to take up arms against the government – a task that appeared impossible at the time.³³ The study of such a versatile organization demands the combination of different approaches, ranging from discourse analysis to statistical methods.

Special attention has been devoted to the UCR's public discourse. Central to this work is the idea that one of the main aspects that divided the UCR from other political parties were the political and economic principles articulated by the party. A series of circumstances prompted a group of men to organize the Radical Party, but it was the ideology of the party that sculpted its identity. By ideology I mean not a coherent intellectual doctrine, but a loose association of ideas destined to gain support, to construct a shared belief, to generate enthusiasms, to inspire action. Ideologies define roles, rank values, and create identities for organizations grouped around them.³⁴ The party's ideology has been mainly reconstructed through the pages of the UCR's newspaper, *El Argentino*, the speeches of party leaders, party manifestos, and congressional debates. The printed words and the public speeches were a constitutive element of the country's politics and played an active role in shaping it.

The UCR built a public political discourse which reconstructed a version of the country's political past, present, and future that contrasted sharply with the ideas expressed by the PAN. However, the UCR did not seek radical institutional, political, and/or social change. The radicals portrayed themselves as the guardians of Argentina's political tradition and constitutional principles as defined in 1853 rather than as the moderniz-

33 To launch a party with such characteristics had seemed impossible since the 1870s. See T. Halperín Donghi, "Una nación para el desierto argentino," *Proyecto y construcción de una nación*, Caracas, 1980, pp. lxxii–lxxiii.

34 Today's common distinction between the intellectual and the ideological derives from C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London, 1973.

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ers of the country's political system. These principles had, in their view, been corrupted by the two presidents of the 1880s. The radicals claimed that the PAN's consolidation of its hold on Argentina during the 1880s, combined with the institutional, political, economic, and social changes that took place during that decade, had undermined the country's institutions. Argentina's federal organization had been, they claimed, betrayed by the state-building process and by the centralization of power in the hands of the national executive. The country had been invaded by a new official public discourse which valued stability and material wealth over the citizen's civic virtues. Argentina's previously healthy political life, the UCR argued, had vanished under the dominance of the PAN.

The radicals claimed that this state of affairs justified the use of violence to topple the government. Their public defense of the use of violence and the series of revolutions they organized against the government generated intense public debate during the 1890s. All political parties became involved in an agitated public struggle for the appropriation of legitimacy and fought to impose their own interpretation of the country's history and of its current development.³⁵ This debate, and the revolutions the radicals organized throughout the country, clearly defined the differences between the UCR and the PAN and pushed them into irreconcilable positions. The radicals' defense of the use of violence became the party's distinguishing feature, producing the most enduring division between the UCR and the other political parties. Indeed, the UCR's claim that violence against the government was legitimate not only resulted in confrontations between the radicals and the PAN but also isolated the UCR from other political organizations that at different times opposed the government. These parties and factions agreed with many of the Radical's criticisms against the PAN, but they also publicly opposed the radicals' revolutionary strategy.

The emphasis on the radicals' political discourse in explaining the formation of the UCR does not imply neglecting the economic and social circumstances in which the party emerged or a reduction of politics of the period to a competition between political discourses.³⁶ The profound economic and social changes experienced by Argentina during the last decades of the nineteenth century naturally affected the organization of the party.

35 The relevance of this type of struggle has been marked by R. Chartier, *Cultural History*, Cambridge 1988, p. 5.

36 Here I followed the criticisms of Sewell, among others, to the reductionist tendencies witnessed in some of the leading studies of discourse analysis, such as Furet, Baker, and Hunt. W.H. Sewell, Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and What Is the Third Estate?*, Durham and London, 1994, pp. 26–37; F. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Cambridge, 1981; L. Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, Berkeley, 1984; K.M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1990.