

Romero, L.A., 2013, *La Argentina que duele. Historia, política, sociedad. Conversaciones con Alejandro Katz*, Katz Editores, Buenos Aires – Móstoles (Madrid), pp. 203.

At the beginning it has to be noted, that the reviewed volume appeared in a very interesting series entitled “Discusiones.” Judging by the names of the authors and the subject of the books already published, the intention of Katz Editores was to present titles – some of them translated, some of them originally in Spanish – dealing with questions crucial for the contemporary world (for example: *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a world of strangers* by Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Why not socialism?* by Gerald A. Cohen, *Manual del votante perplejo* by Marcos Novaro, *Not for profit. Why democracy needs the humanities* by Martha C. Nussbaum, *Más democracia, menos liberalismo* by Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca or *A sociology of globalization* by Saskia Sassen). The subjects touched upon by Alejandro Katz (the founder of the Katz Editores in 2005) and Luís Alberto Romero during their conversations make the reviewed title a perfect addition to such a series, as they discuss a set of topics without which it is impossible to grasp Argentina’s past, present and near future.

What is of the greatest importance is, of course, who is actually taking part in the conversations mentioned in the book’s title. Undoubtedly, both participants have to be considered – due to their vast knowledge and professional credentials – as being well prepared to talk about Argentina not only in an engaging, but also in an insightful way. Luis Alberto Romero (born 1944) is one of the most respected historians in Argentina. Until 2010 he was a professor of history at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras at the University of Buenos Aires (Universidad de Buenos Aires) and until 2014 Investigador Principal at CONICET (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas; The National Scientific and Technical Research Council is the main governmental organization in Argentina responsible for the promotion of science and technology). At present, Romero is teaching at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella and Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales. He is also responsible for the well-known series “Historia y Cultura” published by the Argentine branch of the

respected publisher Siglo Veintiuno Editores. He is the author of numerous books as well. Probably the most influential among them is *Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina* originally published in 1994 (what is interesting in the context of the present review is the fact that it was Katz who in 1993 had asked Romero “to write a book about contemporary Argentina”). As a result of its popularity, first in 2001 and later in 2012, the revised and updated editions were made available to the readers. It was translated into English by the historian James P. Brennan as *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century* and published by the Pennsylvania State University Press. The present reviewer is probably not exaggerating when he states that it currently it is the standard text on the contemporary history of Argentina worldwide. Last but not least Romero – besides his academic activities – is also a frequent political commentator publishing, among others, in the two biggest Buenos Aires dailies *La Nación* and *Clarín*. In other words, he skillfully combines the role of an academic with that of a public intellectual engaged in the current affairs of his country.

On the other hand Alejandro Katz not only has a vast experience in the publishing industry (for example, for many years he worked as an editor and director at the Argentine branch of Fondo de Cultura Económica publishing house), but also as an academic, due to his teaching at the University of Buenos Aires and Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero. He is an essayist and *La Nación* columnist too. As the title of the book states, the reader is dealing here with conversations instead of a simple interview. As a consequence, the views of Romero are of primary importance, but at the same time Katz is not totally eclipsed by him.

As was stated above, their conversations touch upon subjects that are crucial for understanding the Argentine reality (which is painful, as the book’s title says...). What are they? In the order of appearance: the state, government and society; the crisis of Argentine politics, political patronage and poverty; nation and nationalism; Peronism; human rights and Argentine ideologies; the Malvinas (in other words, the Falkland Islands). Obviously each of them is a broad one and hence the amount of scintillating insights on offer is at times almost overwhelming. In the first part, for instance, besides dealing at length with the questions regarding the responsibilities of an historian and

intellectual in the wider society, one encounters probably the central theoretical concept of Romero's political thinking, i.e. the analytical distinction between the state and the government. In his opinion the arbitrary and/or authoritarian government weaving its way among various narrow and insular interest groups (it is the case of Argentina under the Kirchners) should never be confounded with the effective and well-functioning state. The latter should also outlive the governments which tend to change rather frequently because of the electoral cycles. Naturally, he is also in favor of strong republican institutions, enabling the citizens not only to actively participate in the debates regarding the policies and other activities of the state (the terms 'deliberative democracy', 'consensus', 'common good' or 'strategic planning' appear fairly often on the pages of this book, along with the names of Émile Durkheim, Jürgen Habermas, Ernest Renan or Pierre Rosanvallon), but also providing a system of functioning checks and balances between various levels and branches of the government (as opposed to the Argentine practical, though not necessarily formal, 'presidencialismo'). Another important theoretical stance of Romero is his adherence to the idea of constitutional patriotism with pluralism intrinsically intertwined with it. As he observes, reminding the reader of the famous sermon on the constitution given by friar Mamerto Esquiú on 9 July 1853 in Catamarca, until the late 19th century it used to be the dominant doctrine in Argentina, only later to be replaced by its more confrontational and resentful counterpart.

When it comes to the Peronism, Romero views as highly problematic that it possesses neither republican nor liberal characteristics (the lack of them is closely related with the Peronist concept of the permanent state of emergency and the so called "decisionismo" that stems from it), which has severely complicated the transformation of Argentina into the state which would be the closest to his own, liberal views. It is interesting how he associates the problem of Argentina's political and social transformation with the question of the Malvinas/Falklands. In his opinion, the sovereign will of the Falklanders (the so called Kelpers) has to be respected (they are willing to continue their ties with the United Kingdom). On the other hand, he is convinced that the islands may at some point be under Argentina's control, but to achieve this it is necessary not only to guarantee the respect of the civic rights of the islanders, but first to renew Argentina by turning

it into a modern state of the highest quality with a sound economic future. The chapter on human rights is particularly important because of Romero's remarks on the problem of historical memory and the official public discourse influencing it (in his opinion a serious discussion about the question of violence in the Argentine history and society has yet to begin).

This stimulating and insightful book would without doubt make a great seminar read as it contains a number of interesting points which invite lively discussion. It would be even better if the aim of such a seminar would be to compare the contemporary histories of Argentina and Poland as there are many possibilities to make interesting parallels. The result of the recent presidential election has ended the age of Kirchnerism in the politics of Argentina. It could be safely assumed that both Romero and Katz are cautiously hopeful that maybe with the ascent of Mauricio Macri the transformation they were talking about would finally begin. It would be fascinating to read their assessment of the years to come in a sequel to this important volume.

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