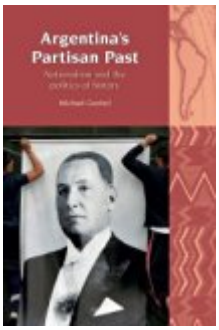
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Goebel Michael. *Argentina's Partisan Past: Nationalism and the politics of history.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011. 284 S. $95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84631-238-0.

Reviewed by Mariano Ben Plotkin

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 2012)

In November 2011 Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner created a new state-funded history institute: the "Instituto Nacional de Revisionismo Histórico Argentino e Iberoamericano Manuel Dorrego," with the purpose of promoting the research and diffusion of a "national and popular" version of national history, a version associated to what is known as "revisionismo histórico," historical revisionism. The fact that still in the twenty-first century a Peronist government understands that the state should promote the dissemination of what it considers to be the "true version of history," in opposition to the supposedly "falsified history" of the so-called "liberal historiography," thus reviving an 80 year old political debate, shows to what extent history in Argentina continues to be a political weapon. Michael Goebel´s fine volume, well researched and argued, historicizes the Argentine "combats for history," rightly placing them at the convergence of political and intellectual history. In particular, his purpose is to analyze "the interaction between nationalism and the politics of history in twentieth-century Argentina" (p. 1).

"Revisionismo histórico" originated in the 1930s among right-wing nationalist intellectuals who wanted to dispute the Argentine liberal tradition and particularly what they considered to be the "liberal" version of the national past imposed by the elites that ruled the country in the second half of the nineteenth century. To put it simply, revisionism claimed (and still claims) the existence of two Argentinas: one cosmopolitan, liberal, philo-European and associated to the interests of foreign (particularly British) interests, located mostly in the city of Buenos Aires; another deeper Argentina of the caudillos and gauchos from the interior who represented the true essence of the nation and of the Argentine people. In practical terms, however, the chief achievement of revisionism consisted in replacing the official national pantheon composed by those who the nationalists considered to be traitors and sellouts to British imperialism with another pantheon largely composed by caudillos from the interior at the top of whom is Juan Manuel de Rosas, the dictator who ruled the province of Buenos Aires (and, de facto, the whole country) for over twenty years until he was defeated at the battle of Caseros in 1852. The

social impact of revisionism has been based more on its ability to provide simple answers to complicated questions than on the quality of its products.

Although the version of the past promoted by historical revisionism never became a truly "official history" (although some governments, like the current one have, however, incorporated some elements of it), throughout the decades, and particularly since the late 1960s, this version of history gradually became a kind of historical "common sense." Paradoxically, as Goebel points out, revisionists have claimed to be persecuted and marginalized while their version of history became widely popularized and accepted by large sectors of the population. It could be said that at least some elements of the revisionist version of history (particularly the idea of "two Argentinas") became internalized and, to some extent, naturalized not only by many Argentines but also by some foreign scholars working on Argentine nationalism and the formation of a national identity. See, in particular, Nicolas Shumway, The Invention of Argentina, Berkeley 1991. Goebel, however, makes clear that the idea of two Argentinas is a historical construction and not an essential quality of the Argentine nation. Where others see two clearly identifiable political traditions, Goebel sees a matrix of interpretation (p. 17). In this context, the author's nuanced book is a welcome contribution to the debate around Argentine nationalism(s) and the uses of the past. Throughout the five chapters of the volume Goebel ably follows the origins and later development of Argentine nationalism and historical revisionism during almost one century. He focuses on the multiple appropriations and internal tensions and contradictions of historical revisionism and its articulation with different versions (both right- and left-wing) of nationalism. Particularly successful is Goebel´s analysis of the way in which the Peronists (especially the Peronist left) appropriated revisionism in the 1960s and 1970s turning what used to be a version of history attractive mostly to some right-wing nostalgics and philo-fascists into a broadly disseminated and accepted vision of the past as well as a political weapon for the present.

Goebel rightly disputes those visions that see a simple line of continuity between the pro-fascist nationalists of the 1930s and 1940s and the military dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, he shows that although the dictators sometimes used some elements (ideas and individuals) from nationalism and revisionism, their murderous actions and policies recognized a much more complex set of sources of inspiration among which revisionism and nationalism were not the most important ones. In fact, it can be said that – as the author himself suggests –, neither revisionism nor nationalism have been the main elements that have defined the Argentines´ identity. After 1945 most forms of identity collapsed into the dichotomy Peronist/anti-Peronist, and this lasted at least until the 1990s. Both Peronism and anti-Peronism agglutinated a series of different and many times completely incompatible elements.

This otherwise excellent book has, nonetheless, a few weak points. First, there is a permanent displacement of its focus between broadly defined nationalism and the more specific historical revisionism, to the point that sometimes it is difficult to say what the main theme of the book is. Of course, there is a close relationship between nationalism and revisionism, but this relationship has sometimes become very complex, as Goebel shows. Second, I missed a deeper discussion of the relations between historical revisionism and academic-professional history. In the last decades there have been important debates within the field of professional history about the role of popular diffusers (closely associated to a revisionist version of history) and the canonical versions of the past. Very little of this is present in Goebel´s volume. Third, although the author points out in the introduction that his approach is not comparative and that he focuses on a single case study, his broader theoretical concerns on "the nature of

nationalism and the reasons for its endurance as a phenomenon shaping contemporary culture and politics" (p. 2) would have been better served by including some comparative discussion on the differences and similarities existing between the Argentine and other Latin American cases. Finally, there are a few minor factual mistakes sprinkled throughout the book: Popular historian Félix Luna would have hardly identified himself as a liberal as is said on page 198; Viedma is the capital of the province of Rio Negro, and therefore not located in the province of Buenos Aires (p. 199); and Leopoldo Lugones was never an anti-Semite as Goebel seems to suggest in page 37. If anything, Lugones was one of the few (if not the only one) philo-Semitic Argentine right-wingers. But these are really minor shortcomings of an important book that is destined to become mandatory reference for anyone interested in Argentina's political and intellectual history of the twentieth century.