Chapter 3

Commerce, Cattle and Caudillos

Fragmented sovereignty and caudillismo in early post-Independence Argentina were rooted in the institutional geography of Spanish colonial rule, in the specific historical features of the Independence process, and in the region's postcolonial political economy. The first two of these were discussed at some length in the preceding chapter; this chapter will take up the economic evolution of the Río de la Plata from colonial times onward, and situate therein the political conflicts of the 1830s and 40s that shaped an emerging repertoire of militaristic political practices.

From autarky to entrepôt

At the end of the sixteenth century, the Spanish *adelantados* who held the first *encomiendas* and royal land grants in the area around Buenos Aires engaged mainly in subsistence agriculture using coerced indigenous labor. Even in this early period some long-distance trade in slaves and precious metals had begun to pass through Buenos Aires,

linking Upper Peru with Brazil, Europe, and Africa. Such commerce, which proceeded without the sanction of the Spanish Crown, "had very little impact on the local life of Buenos Aires; it included scarcely any product of the region itself, and the city's own inhabitants hardly participated in it, not even as intermediaries." Early in the seventeenth century, the Crown sought to bar long-distance trade through Buenos Aires altogether. But the new regulations did allow the *vecinos* of the port city to continue to engage in local commerce. As a porteño merchant elite took shape among the *vecinos*, they largely ignored the royal strictures and expanded their commercial activities. Precious metals originating in Upper Peru's mines were now exported in exchange for ironwares, textiles, sugar, and African slaves. (Gelman 1987: 90-94; 98ff.)

In the absence of a large colonial bureaucracy of the sort found in more central zones of the Empire such as New Spain or Peru, Buenos Aires came early to be dominated by merchants. Indeed, clerics and colonial functionaries in the port city were powerful and wealthy only to the extent that they also participated in commerce. A merchant guild

or *consulado* was late in making its appearance in Buenos Aires, inasmuch as merchants could exercise decisive political weight in the municipal *cabildo* without recourse to corporate organization. (Céspedes 1947: 14-16)

As more and more silver moved from Potosí through Buenos Aires, barter declined and the regional economy was at least partially monetized. Monetary transactions were conducted by both Buenos Aires merchants and provincial traders coming to the port from Chile, Tucumán, or Potosí. The old conquistador-encomendero class became increasingly indebted and thereby subordinated to the porteño merchants. But monetization remained incomplete insofar as the merchants themselves accumulated large landholdings and likewise relied on coerced labor to produce subsistence goods for the urban population. (Gelman 1987: 95-96, 103-04)

Owing to the Spanish Crown's strategic need for a military-administrative base in the Río de la Plata, only perfunctory efforts were made to suppress commerce at Buenos Aires from the late seventeenth century on. The Crown accepted trade as the only economic activity that could make Buenos Aires viable over the long term. The *situado*, a

subsidy provided to the Buenos Aires garrison from the mines of Potosí, provided further opportunities for the enrichment of merchants who advanced goods to the garrison on credit. Colonial administrators in turn managed their regulatory functions in such a way as to maximize personal gain. (Moutoukias 1988: 787-96) Moutoukias has characterized state/elite dynamics during this period as follows:

> . . . the interrelationship with the administrative structure was intrinsic to the very form of the smuggler-landlords' hegemony over the minuscule universe of the Río de la Plata. . . . The wealth of the merchants consolidated royal power, and the latter propped up its partners. (Moutoukias 1988: 799-800)

The Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata

In 1776 Spain created a new viceroyalty centered on Buenos Aires in order to rebuff Portuguese encroachments on the Plata's eastern shore and fortify the southern route to Potosí against perceived threats from imperial rivals. An *audiencia*, a *tribunal de cuentas*, and a *consulado* were established at Buenos Aires. (Céspedes 1947: 116-23) The local economy boomed around the new viceregal capital: population grew rapidly, the frontier of European settlement was pushed further into the interior, and trade in slaves

redoubled. The cattle industry began a slow rise to predominance as hides and tallow came to figure among the goods destined for export. The new viceroyalty's fiscal resources mounted quickly and no longer depended solely on Potosí. (Céspedes 1947: 126-27)

The most powerful Buenos Aires merchants continued largely to ignore the Crown's regulations even after the establishment of *comercio libre* throughout the Empire in 1778.[1] As the trade in precious metals remained most lucrative, they dealt relatively little in local products such as cattle hides. Nor did they invest in rural productive activities, and while they performed certain crude banking functions they "did not extend credit for the production or processing of raw materials." (Socolow 1975: 12-19) When the European wars of the 1790s disrupted trade, however, differentiations among the merchant elite became pronounced:

> The net effect of the breakdown of traditional trade was to threaten the position of the merchants dealing in efectos de Castilla, to improve the fortunes of the slavers and exporters of hides, and to disturb the ranks of the merchant group in general. (Socolow 1975: 22)

Merchants dependent on privileged relations with Spanish trading houses resisted further trade liberalization, while those exporting cattle hides and ancillary products to neutral nations became more vocal in support of unfettered commerce. (Socolow 1975: 22-23). Even so, the merchants of late-colonial Buenos Aires remained very much dependent on Spanish imperial power and the Potosí silver circuit:

> The hegemony of the commercial sector appeared to be imposed by the very nature of things, and was a necessary aspect of the Colonial order. The prosperity of Buenos Aires, and that of the more modest of the centres of commerce and transport on the Peru route, was fundamentally derived from its participation, although in a subordinate position, in the advantages which that order gave to the marketers -- the local emissaries of Spain's economy -- over the producers. (Halperín Donghi 1975: 37)

Even so, Buenos Aires had become "the largest and most important domestic market in the entire region," drawing locally produced textiles, leather goods, raw cotton, timber, hemp, and salt from interior zones such as Tucumán, Santiago del Estero, and Paraguay that had previously serviced only Potosí. (Brown 1979: 33) The burgeoning of such trade increased traffic on the overland and riverine

routes between Buenos Aires and interior cities. (Whigham 1991: 11-20)

The countryside surrounding Buenos Aires became more differentiated, with grain-producing zones adjacent to urban centers and livestock areas in outlying districts. Indeed, the rural districts became in late-colonial times "one of the most important areas of wheat production and consumption in the Spanish-American continent." Contrary to the anachronistic image of an open range populated almost solely by *gauchos* on horseback, the rural population of Buenos Aires's immediate hinterland in this period consisted largely of tenant *campesinos*, "always trapped between paying their rent and the monopoly of a few merchants and bankers." (Garavaglia 1985: 55, 72-79) Moreover, disruption of the hide trade by European warfare and the advantages enjoyed by the cattle-rich frontier zones of the Banda Oriental had by 1795 "put a brake on the expansion of stock-raising" around Buenos Aires, even though the cattle industry there "continued to be the centre of the economic life." Nearly all estancias in this period combined grain production with stock-raising. (Halperín Donghi 1975: 24)

The onset of *comercio libre* and the large-scale importation of European goods presented a challenge to artisans in the viceregal interior. (Céspedes 1947: 129) Different zones were affected in different ways. Salta indirectly benefitted from the rural uprisings that the Bourbon reforms precipitated in Peru in the 1780s. Post-rebellion shortages of mules and other livestock led to such a windfall in profits that "the Salta aristocracy . . . enjoyed a concentration of economic power unequalled in the River Plate region." (Halperín Donghi 1975: 8)

Tucumán and Córdoba remained relatively prosperous owing to their position athwart the main trade route connecting Upper Peru and Buenos Aires. (Halperín Donghi 1975: 8-12) Craft industries in these districts were relatively little damaged by *comercio libre* inasmuch as fine cloths imported from Europe did not compete with the coarse goods woven locally. Indeed, interior producers were threatened more directly by "textiles from Upper and Lower Peru, the cheapness of which was due to the miserably low standard of living of the Indians, which more than offset the high freight costs." (Halperín Donghi 1975: 12)

Mendoza's large, well-watered oases continued to support the production of cereal grains and the fattening of livestock for export to Chile. (Halperín Donghi 1975: 8-12, 14-15) Other Andean piedmont zones of the Cuyo region -- Catamarca, La Rioja, and San Juan -- suffered more severely from comercio libre. Oasis agriculture now had to compete directly with Mediterranean wines, oils, and dried fruits, "and not only in Buenos Aires":

> . . . the entire Interior, and even Upper Peru, was deluged with products that provoked a catastrophic fall in prices. The ruthless competition between the different Andean regions, all struggling to retain a market which had suddenly shrunk, seemed to offer a prospect of irremediable decline. (Halperín Donghi 1975: 12)

Still, the negative impact of comercio libre was mitigated somewhat by tighter royal control of commerce and especially by the inclusion of Upper Peru in the new viceroyalty:

> Buenos Aires and Potosí were the two poles of viceregal economic activity; the route that joined them -- the old Camino Real, which passed through the most important interior cities -- became the spinal column of the new structure. (Romero 1978: 50)

Thus the subsequent decline of the interior can be attributed more to post-Independence political disruptions than to the impact of comercio libre. Only in San Juan did

the onset of decline correspond to the moment of the Bourbon reforms. (Romero 1978: 50-52)

Economic differentiation also accelerated in the littoral zone upriver from Buenos Aires (Santa Fe, Entre Ríos, Corrientes, and the Banda Oriental). Towns in Corrientes and Santa Fe that had thrived as entrepôts for the trade in *yerba mate* and other products of the Jesuit missions upriver now declined. (Halperín Donghi 1975: 17-25) But the sparsely populated "frontier" zones of Entre Ríos and the Banda Oriental experienced a prosperous transition to a cattle-based monoculture. Competition from these areas -- where large, ownerless herds were still available for exploitation through *vaquerías* (cattle hunts) -- constrained for a time the expansion of stockraising in Buenos Aires province.

Independence and its aftermath

The protracted warfare that plagued the Río de la Plata after Independence had dramatic consequences for the region's economy. The silver circuit linking the Plata and Potosí was irremediably severed when armies dispatched from Buenos Aires failed to dislodge the Spanish from Upper Peru.

(Bushnell 1987: 119-21) This disrupted the entire economy of trade and transport that had ramified since 1776 along the interior route from Buenos Aires through Córdoba, Tucumán, and Salta. The latter centers were now deprived of their main market for mules, foodstuffs, and artisan goods and were thrust back upon their own resources. (Romero 1978: 51-52)

The heretofore dominant sector of porteño merchants tied to the trade in silver and *efectos de Castilla* went into eclipse, displaced by upstart merchants trading in cattle hides and other products of the local countryside (*frutos del país*). These traders initially found lucrative markets for their goods in the expanding industrial centers of the North Atlantic, where leather was wanted for shoe manufacture and for all manner of belts and pulleys used in textile and other machinery. As warfare ravaged the once-wealthy cattle estancias of the littoral and the Banda Oriental (Salvatore 1994: 82-90), fresh opportunities emerged for porteño exporters to ship salted beef to Brazil and Cuba, where it was consumed largely by African slaves. Growing numbers of Buenos Aires merchants now invested

directly in rural production, acquiring estancias of their own from which to supply their urban export enterprises. From 1815 on, moreover, Buenos Aires merchants set up meat-salting establishments (*saladeros*) along the banks of the Riachuelo on the southern outskirts of Buenos Aires city. (Giberti 1961: 84-85; Montoya 1956; Ingenieros 1951: I,542-589)

While the export-led expansion of the cattle industry transformed Buenos Aires province between 1815 and 1830, it did so with little or no technological innovation. Jonathan Brown has termed this period "the era of traditional technology." (Brown 1979: 1) Land transport remained haphazard, slow, and rudimentary. Cattle were driven on the hoof to the *saladeros*, salt was brought from deposits in the south of the province by small coastwise sailing vessels, and hides were carried to the port by high-wheeled ox-carts. Water transport, so crucial to the rapid development of internal trade and manufacturing in the eastern United States of North America during this same period, was not an option for Buenos Aires given the dearth of navigable rivers in the frontier zones. The extremely flat topography and

the vast distances between urban centers likewise precluded the construction of canals.

The labor force for the new enterprises connected with hide and beef exports was to be found among the modestly burgeoning population of "masterless" men first mobilized and then displaced by the Independence wars. The sparsely populated pampas' fecundity in foodstuffs -- wild cattle, ostriches, small game -- meant that rural laborers in this period did not need to resort to waged work for extended periods of time. The early imposition of draconian vagrancy laws had little effect in disciplining a mobile and transient work force long accustomed to living off the land. (Salvatore 1991, 1994)

Expansion of cattle ranching on the open pampa around Buenos Aires was accompanied and facilitated by the penetration of the provincial state into the countryside. Though hardly an unqualified success, the regime's efforts did go some way toward regularizing land titles, disciplining the labor force, and defending estancias against the depredations of indigenous bands. In the 1820s, the government of Bernardino Rivadavia initiated an agrarian

program whereby lands were leased to private parties while formal ownership remained in public hands. (The program was labeled "emphyteusis," a concept drawn from Roman law.) While the aim was to encourage the settlement of immigrant farmers and generate tax revenues that could in turn reduce the state's reliance upon customs duties, the opposite resulted. Inasmuch as the state lacked the bureaucratic capacity to administer the program directly, assessments of land value were made by the lessors themselves and no limits were placed on the area one could claim. Rather than facilitate growth of smallholder agriculture, emphyteusis spurred the consolidation of a class of large landholders and cattle ranchers:

> From 1824 to 1827 a number of enormous grants were made, some individuals receiving over 10 square leagues each (66,710 acres). By 1828 almost 1,000 square leagues (over 6½ million acres) had been granted to 112 people and companies, of whome tne received morethan 130,000 acres each. By the 1830s some 21 million acres of public land had been transferred to 500 individuals. . . . (Lynch 1993: 2-3)

The key institutions in the countryside throughout the first half of the nineteenth century were the justice of the peace (*juez de paz*) and the militia garrison (*fortín*). The

latter were dispersed in rudimentary forts along the frontiers of settlement and offered a frequently porous barrier against raids by indigenous bands. The former, established in 1821, combined the functions of militia commander, police chief, and tax collector:

> [J]ustices of the peace commanded administrative, police, and judicial authority. They heard cases of small felonies, . . . applying fines, incarceration, and whipping. They also performed police tasks, rounding up vagrants, arresting disturbers of the peace, and circulating information about delinquents and deserters. (Salvatore 1991: 259; see also Diaz 1959)

"Ruralization" of political power

The economic transformations of the Independence era facilitated political changes that Tulio Halperín Donghi has labeled the "ruralization of the bases of power." (Halperín Donghi 1975: 377ff.) As the prospects for significant expansion of long-distance interior commerce waned, the interests of urban merchants became more and more tied to the health of the export-based economy of Buenos Aires's own rural hinterland. Merchants increasingly invested in land, cattle, and saladeros, and the weight of the expanding sector of wealthy rural producers in political affairs

increased. Rural class polarization accelerated as small producers were increasingly squeezed between wealthy estancieros at one pole and a burgeoning population of landless, seminomadic *gauchos*[2] at the other.

Such changes in turn facilitated the more and more frequent resort to coercive, militaristic (and, at the extreme, terrorist) practices by elite actors as they contended for control over state power during the first half of the nineteenth century. Access to political power came to depend more and more upon the ability to recruit, arm, mobilize, and hold the loyalty of a cohort of gaucho militia, or else become the patron of someone who could. In either case, possession of land and cattle was a crucial resource. David Rock has summarized the new power configuration in this way:

> The new *caudillos* were mostly . . . upwardly mobile former militiamen with strong roots in the countryside, from which they gathered their retinues of slaves, peons, and *vagos*, or *gauchos* as they were now known. Indeed the rise of the *caudillos* was in some measure a conquest of the towns by the countryside, the overthrow of the mercantile *cabildos* by rural forces whose social and political influence had become steadily more pronounced during the preceding half century. . . . As in the seventeenth century,

> social militarization had its counterpart in ruralization. (Rock 1987: 95)

Buenos Aires and the onset of caudillismo

For Buenos Aires, the year 1820 marked an initial turning point in this process. The would-be national government under *Director Supremo* Juan Martín de Pueyrredón had proven incapable of imposing the highly centralist and implicitly monarchical constitution drawn up in 1819. (Demicheli 1971: 193-94) Its resources exhausted by José de San Martín's trans-Andean expedition against remaining royalist forces in Chile and Peru, the Directorio collapsed when the armies of federalist caudillos Estanislao López of Santa Fe and Francisco Ramírez of Entre Ríos occupied Buenos Aires. In the resulting vacuum of central power, provincial rulers throughout the region asserted sovereignty:

> Throughout the provinces *cabildos abiertos* met to proclaim local self-rule. Provincial warlords . . . like López and Ramírez formally took power: Bernabé Araoz in Tucumán, Juan Bautista Bustos in Córdoba, Felipe Ibarra in Santiago del Estero, and [Martín] Güemes in Salta. Several provinces followed the lead of Entre Ríos and declared themselves independent republics; others, like Salta and Tucumán, turned against each other in numerous petty civil wars. (Rock 1987: 93)

Asserting Buenos Aires's own sovereignty in face of López and Ramírez's attempt to subjugate the province, porteño notables such as Martín Rodríguez and Manuel Dorrego called upon estancieros in the southern frontier zone to mobilize militia units:

> [Juan Manuel de] Rosas in particular was ready to come. Hitherto he had not sought public appointments. Now, as joint proprietor of the estancias Los Cerrillos and San Martín and administrator of those of the Anchorena, he first appeared in a political role. ...
>
> His basic recruiting ground was his own estancia: "I spoke to the hands on the estancia where I live on the frontier of the Monte; they came forward to follow me, and with them and some cavalry militia I marched to the assistance of our honourable capital." . . . These were the original Colorados del Monte, 500 men, and they joined the army of Buenos Aires as the Fifth Regiment of Militia. (Lynch 1981: 27)

After several months of warfare that laid waste to the northern districts of the province, Estanislao López was compelled to make peace and leave Buenos Aires to its own devices. To facilitate the settlement, Rosas sent thousands of cattle to Santa Fe from his own estancias. Meanwhile, Rosas's Colorados had entered the city to suppress a renewed federalist uprising and confirm Martín Rodríguez as governor. Some members of the urban elite expressed dismay

at the rough and ready methods of the Colorados -- "one of the earliest expressions of a theme recurrent in Argentine historiography, that Rosas used a gaucho power base to intimidate the upper classes, and imposed rural barbarism on urban civilization." (Lynch 1981: 28)

While the events of 1820 set an important precedent for the arbitration of political power by rural militia commanders, Rosas and his colleagues largely withdrew from politics for the time being to devote themselves to the further expansion of cattle-raising and saladerista operations. The instruments of state once more came into the hands of the lawyers, intellectuals, and professional politicians who had predominated before the national government's collapse in 1820. This current had by now come to be known as "Unitarians," owing to their identification with the 1819 attempt to impose a centralist constitution. The restored rulers agreed that the country's future prosperity depended in large measure on the continued growth of the stockraising economy, but they confronted a choice of means to accomplish this: whether to reassert Buenos Aires's sovereignty over the rich cattle lands of the

littoral and the Banda Oriental, now held by or moving into the sphere of influence of the Brazilian Empire; or instead to devote provincial resources to territorial expansion to the south and west through further encroachments on the nomadic indigenous population. The latter frequently raided outlying estancias and drove the stock across the pampas and through mountain passes to markets in Chile.

Either course would have entailed an expansion of the provincial state's capacity, in the first instance the construction of a stronger military apparatus. After Governor Martín Rodríguez met only with mixed success in an expedition against the Indians in 1823, priority was placed upon reconquering the Banda Oriental and the littoral. Prime Minister Rivadavia and his collaborators saw this military effort as central to a renewed attempt to forge a unitary state from among the fractious provinces. War against Brazil offered an opportunity to rally patriotic pride around the banner of the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata, provisionally reconstituted in 1824 through the convocation of another national Congress. (Demicheli 1971: 201ff.)

A landing on the Plata's eastern shore by an exile force (*los 30 y 3 orientales*) was followed by the reorganization and deployment of the national army in the Banda Oriental in May 1825. While the Argentines prevailed on land with major victories at Sarandí in October 1825 and Ituzaíngo in February 1827, they proved unable to oust Brazilian forces from the port of Montevideo or break the Empire's naval blockade of Buenos Aires. Military stalemate drained the resources of the fledgling national state, while the blockade accelerated the turn by Buenos Aires merchants away from interprovincial commerce toward acquisition of land, cattle herds, and saladeros. (Ferns 1969: 81)

The prolonged war, the Unitarians' anticlerical encroachments on church prerogatives, and particularly their attempt to divide rural Buenos Aires into two provinces and separate the port city as a national capital all evoked growing opposition and finally precipitated the wholesale collapse of the national government. (Barba 1972: Ch.1; Monsma 1992) Rivadavia resigned in June 1827 as both president and provincial governor; the presidency was left vacant, the national congress dispersed, and the federalist

Manuel Dorrego was installed as Buenos Aires governor. With the mediation of British diplomats, Dorrego concluded peace with Brazil and recognized Uruguay as an independent republic. As in 1820, the Plata again reverted to a congeries of quasisovereign provinces.

The rise of Juan Manuel de Rosas

While Governor Dorrego and his followers termed themselves "Federalists," the referent of this label in the Buenos Aires context was becoming increasingly problematic. (In the littoral provinces, federalism clearly connoted support for provincial autonomy and the cultivation of a popular following.) Dorrego was indeed a federalist in the doctrinal sense, having recently traveled in the United States and professed admiration for the U.S. constitutional order. While he also enjoyed broad support among the subaltern population of the city and countryside, the wealthy and propertied elements of his coalition abhorred efforts to mobilize this base, fearing a recrudescence of *artiguismo*. So a split among the newly empowered federalists was already looming, between the doctrinaire, populist politicians around Dorrego (the so-called *lomos*

negros, later *císmaticos*), and the estancieros and militia officers who looked to Rosas for leadership (this faction came to be called the *apostólicos*). (Barba 1972: 43ff.)

But the Federalists first had to confront a renewed Unitarian threat. All that remained of Rivadavia's national government were the regular army units returning from the battlefields of Uruguay; their officers were disgruntled at Buenos Aires's failure to continue the war effort. At the behest of Unitarians such as Salvador María del Carril and Juan Cruz Varela, Gen. Juan Lavalle and other national officers launched an uprising against Governor Dorrego on December 1, 1828. Twelve days later, Dorrego was captured and executed on Lavalle's orders. This atrocity evoked near-universal outrage, not only among Dorrego's plebeian partisans but also from landowners and rural notables. Rebellions spread among the rural people of the southern districts. (González Bernaldo 1994)

Taking advantage of the rural unrest but also seeking to defuse and harness it, Rosas again mobilized militia units. His gaucho cavalry eventually besieged Buenos Aires city, forced the removal of Lavalle, and drove the remnants

of the national army out of the province. These actions gained him election as governor (with "extraordinary powers" voted by the legislature) and the acclaim and loyalty of the plebeian sectors that had provided a key base of support to Dorrego. Rosas was thereby able to isolate the *lomo negro* Federalist politicians and consolidate his personal power and that of his faction, the *apostólicos*. (Halperín Donghi 1972: 308-12; Lobato 1983) Rosas "took power amidst an orgy of pure personalism, basically alien to federalist thinking. Order and security, observed a newspaper report, were best assured not by general laws but 'by the character of our worthy governor; that is where we will find all the guarantees which good citizens can desire.'" (Lynch 1982: 43) Lynch further sums up the outcome of the 1829 events as follows:

> In effect the Buenos Aires landowners overthrew the existing ruling group, the politicians, bureaucrats, and associated military, and took direct possession of the government of the province through their representative, Rosas. In 1829 Rosas succeeded in dismantling the remnants of the army of independence already weakened by the war in the Banda Oriental; thus, the defeat of Lavalle was the defeat of a professional army, a rival force, by the militia of Rosas and his estanciero allies. (Lynch 1982: 45)[3]

But the national army had not yet been wholly destroyed. Remaining intact units under Gen. José María Paz now seized control of Córdoba and forged a coalition among the interior provinces, the *Liga del Interior*. Federalist-controlled Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, and Entre Ríos ranged themselves into a counter-coalition, the *Pacto Federal*. With the fortuitous capture of General Paz by Federalist forces in May 1831, however, the Liga del Interior collapsed.

Once the immediate Unitarian threat had seemingly been disposed of, the porteño rulers again turned their attention to rural pacification and territorial expansion in the south and west. The legislature declined in 1831 to extend Rosas's "extraordinary powers" and instead assigned him to organize a large-scale expedition aimed at driving the indigenous bands out of the pampas altogether. While the effort failed to rout the Indians wholly, it did force them into a *modus vivendi* such that the provincial state was able to maintain a peaceable frontier by providing regular subsidies of horses, foodstuffs, and other supplies to the

Indians. The frontier truce persisted into the 1850s (see below, p. 4-_). (Jones 1994; Slatta 1989)

Now heralded by his partisans not only as "Restorer of the Laws" but also as "Conqueror of the Wilderness,"[4] Rosas again turned his attention to Buenos Aires politics, where his erstwhile loyalist Gov. Juan Ramón Balcarce had come under the influence of a disparate bloc of remnant Unitarians, army officers, and dissident Federalist politicians and publicists (termed *cismáticos*, "splitters," by the rosistas). Encouraged by Rosas's extensive correspondence from the field, his supporters among estancieros, militia officers, and other clients began to press for his restoration to power. A turning point came in October 1833 when a large crowd of plebeians gathered outside the Buenos Aires courthouse to protest the prosecution for libel of a rosista newspaper, *El Restaurador de las Leyes*. Many among them had been led to believe that Rosas himself -- "El Restaurador" -- was being placed on trial. The crowd withdrew to the city's outskirts, where it was joined by gaucho cavalry from the south and west. The rosistas began a weeks-long siege of Buenos Aires that ended

in the removal of Governor Balcarce and his replacement by General Viamonte. Rosas was not yet in a position to return to power on his own terms, but Viamonte's government would remain at the mercy of the rosistas until the legislature finally voted Rosas "the entire sum of public power" in February 1835.

Within the city, the 1833 *Revolución de los Restauradores* was organized in important part by Rosas's wife, Encarnación Ezcurra de Rosas. Rosas himself remained in the field but carried on an extensive correspondence with Encarnación and other trusted lieutenants. His letters to his wife stressed the importance of consolidating the Federalists' plebeian clientele:

> You have now seen how much the friendship of the poor is worth, and thus how important it is to sustain it in order to attract and cultivate their good will. So do not cease your correspondence. Write to them frequently, send gifts of any sort, without worrying about the expense. I say the same with respect to the mothers and wives of the *pardos* [mulattos] and *morenos* [blacks] who are faithful. Do not hesitate, I repeat, to visit the deserving ones and take them along on your rural excursions, and also do what you can to succor them in their despair. Invite the faithful friends who have served you to play billiards in the house and give them whatever other gifts you can. (Rosas to Encarnación Ezcurra de Rosas, November 23, 1833; excerpted in Lobato 1983: 90)

From this clientele (as well as from the militias and police) were drawn recruits for *La Mazorca*, Rosas's notorious terror apparatus. Its assaults on and threats against the lives of known liberals and anti-Rosas Federalists forced most into exile and largely silenced those remaining in the years after 1833. *La Mazorca* did the dirty work, while other Rosas stalwarts were publicly organized in the *Sociedad Popular Restauradora* (People's Restoration Society), which took charge of the elaborately staged festivals, illuminations, *Te Deums*, and other displays of rosista fervor that became a hallmark of the 1830s and 40s in Buenos Aires. (Lynch 1981: 215-20; Salvatore 1993; González Bernaldo 1992: 341-44) The lively atmosphere of political debate and contentious mobilization that had suggested the emergence of a public sphere in the 1810s and 20s was all but snuffed out amid Rosas's coercive *unanimsmo*. (González Bernaldo 1992: 357-65)

Confederation and conflict

Rosas repeatedly rebuffed those who sought to institutionalize a central Argentine state, preferring instead to enforce his hegemony over the nominal Argentine Confederation with a mix of armed force and patron-client ties to the lesser caudillos of the littoral and interior provinces. The Federal Pact of 1831 delegated to the governor of Buenos Aires the power to conduct foreign affairs on behalf of all the Argentine provinces, and Rosas jealously guarded this prerogative. Even so, his dominance within Buenos Aires after 1835 was not readily replicated among the other Argentine provinces.

At the outset, Rosas's aspirations were facilitated by the eclipse of would-be rivals for leadership of the Federalist cause. Facundo Quiroga, caudillo of La Rioja, was assassinated in Córdoba in 1835. Estanislao López of Santa Fe refrained from challenging Rosas inasmuch as his province was increasingly dependent upon subsidies from Buenos Aires -- a situation that sooner or later would prevail in the other provinces as well. (Chiaramonte et al. 1993) López died in 1838, thus eliminating the only senior

Federalist caudillo of comparable stature to Rosas. (Lynch 1993: 31)

The Federal Pact also called for a General Federative Congress to deliberate on foreign and local commerce, river navigation, fiscal issues, and the national debt, but Rosas vetoed all efforts to convene such a Congress. (Cragnolino and Schwarzstein 1984: 11-12) A transitory Representative Commission met several times in 1831-32 but broke up amid a heated debate in which Buenos Aires's representatives rejected efforts by Corrientes governor Pedro Ferré to secure protection for local manufacturers, artisans, and wine, tobacco, and cotton producers. (Whigham 1991: 46-48; Lynch 1981: 138-40) Buenos Aires, Ferré declared, was ruining the interior economies, whose development depended upon

> . . . the promotion of domestic industry. If the importation of wines, brandies, textiles and other products furnished by our fertile land were prohibited, production of these would achieve their due importance, and so would all the other branches of national industry. (Quoted in Lynch 1981: 139)

Ferré also demanded a halt to Buenos Aires's practice of monopolizing international commerce by barring foreign

navigation on the interior rivers, a policy facilitated by the city's strategic position athwart the Río de la Plata. But opening upriver ports to foreign shipping would have put Buenos Aires's control of customs revenue at risk, and Rosas steadfastly opposed such a demand.

These economic conflicts at the outset of Rosas's rule were the harbinger of recurring contention between Buenos Aires and the interior. A mildly protectionist tariff law was promulgated by the port province in 1835 but proved only a temporary palliative, and the long-term economic decline of the interior provinces continued. (Burgin 1946; L. Romero 1970)

By the late 1830s, several provincial governors were again ready to respond militarily to perceived slights and arrogance at the hands of the porteños. In February 1839, Corrientes Gov. Berón de Astrada launched a brief war against Rosas, but his forces were routed at Pago Largo the following month. Later that year, Rosas launched a pre-emptive strike against Gov. Domingo Cullen of Santa Fe, forcing him to flee the province and then sending troops to track him down and execute him. (Lynch 1981: 202, 226)

British/French blockades/interventions; Unitario collaboration and encouragement

Affairs in Uruguay became still more complicated when Rosas's client Manuel Oribe was deposed by a rival caudillo, Fructuoso Rivera, in June 1838. Rivera soon found an important base of support among Unitarian exiles from Buenos Aires who wanted to use Montevideo as the launching point for military efforts to overthrow Rosas. In 1840, a Unitarian force commanded by General Lavalle invaded Buenos Aires province from Uruguay. An interior bloc, the *Coalición del Norte*, likewise rose in arms. But Lavalle lost his nerve before Buenos Aires and began a long retreat into the interior, pursued mercilessly by Federalist troops commanded by Oribe. Oribe conducted a scorched-earth campaign throughout the northern interior, finally bringing down Lavalle in Jujuy in October 1841. He next swept back through the littoral, suppressing renewed challenges in Corrientes and Entre Ríos, and finally returned to Uruguay in early 1843 to initiate a decade-long siege of Montevideo. (Lynch 1981: ___)

Lavalle's retreat from Buenos Aires was doubly disastrous inasmuch as he left in the lurch a group of disgruntled estancieros in Rosas's own erstwhile stronghold in the southern frontier districts of the province, who mobilized a force of 2,000 gauchos at Dolores, Chascomús, and Tuyú in November 1839. Propaganda materials produced by these rebels, known to history as *Los Libres del Sur*, "denounced the impoverishment of the people of the south through frontier service and costly wars, the oppressive rule of local *rosista* tyrants, [and] the indifference of the government to southern interests." (Lynch 1981: 206; Sáenz Quesada 1991: 142-49; Halperín Donghi 1963: 94-95) These interests have been detailed by Lynch as follows:

> The hacendados of the south . . . suffered a form of discrimination at the hands of the saladeros of Buenos Aires, a powerful interest closely identified with the Rosas regime. Market conditions imposed by the *saladeristas* were inimical to the south. During the long cattle drive northwards the herds lost weight, and as weight determined price the saladeros in the vicinity of Buenos Aires placed an extra charge on the southerners, adding to their costs the pre-sale fattening of their cattle in pastures close to the saladeros. (Lynch 1981: 206)

But the southern rebels proved no match for Rosas's troops, and the uprising was crushed in a matter of five

days. (Lynch 1981: 207) In the aftermath, the estancias of the rebels were confiscated. Those leaders not captured and executed fled to refuge in Uruguay, accompanied by the remnants of their gaucho cavalry. (Halperín Donghi 1963: 95)

The 1840s were marked by renewed interprovincial warfare, overlaid by an on-again, off-again conflict with Britain and France over commercial access to the interior rivers. The latter was settled in 1849 largely on Rosas's terms, signaling Buenos Aires's renewed determination to monopolize the customs revenue and put strict limits on foreign vessels' access to the waterways of the Plata. (Rube 1978: 7-20; Oddone 1937: 250-51) As we shall see in Chapter 4, this would provoke strong opposition from upriver producers in the littoral provinces, who during the intermittent French and British blockades of the Paraná had become wealthy by shipping wool and hides directly to Europe from open ports on the Uruguay. (Urquiza Almandoz 1978: 250-52)

Fragmented sovereignty and political practices

As the preceding narrative suggests, a crucial consequence of fragmented sovereignty in the Río de la Plata was near-endemic warfare among the multiple provinces. While Buenos Aires was in an advantageous position vis-à-vis rivals, its hegemony was by no means absolute and its rulers were on constant guard against the emergence of a coalition of hostile provinces. Rosas often launched pre-emptive military moves against such an eventuality. In this situation, a provincial regime's internal opponents were prone to seek support from the regime of an adjacent or rival province; likewise, provincial rulers anxious to get out from under Rosas's thumb were likely to seek coalition partners not only among their Argentine counterparts but also among non-Argentine powers. Such ongoing warfare with its shifting alliances and recurrent mobilizations of gaucho armies shaped the emergence of a shared repertoire of political practices in the Plata between 1820 and 1840. This repertoire had evolved in consonance with the zone's archaic urban and rural social structure and with the vague contours of the sovereign entities that had sifted out of

the post-Independence chaos. As we have seen, the typical practices deployed by contenders for or holders of political power in the Plata during the 1820s-40s included:

(1) the impressment and arming of mounted rural laborers and the use of such a militia or *montonera* either to conquer power in a provincial capital outright or to negotiate from a position of strength;

(2) the enlisting of military and diplomatic aid from neighboring sovereigns and extraregional powers, either to bolster one's own regime or bring pressure to bear for internal change. As Halperín Donghi has put it,

> In the unruly Latin America of the decade of the 30s, domestic and foreign policy were separated by imprecise frontiers. The Portales administration in Chile, Santa Cruz's in Bolivia, and Oribe's in the Banda Oriental frequently tolerated the actions of the Argentine dissidents, and even went so far as to stimulate them, applying that elemental rule of Spanish-American politics (one that was also in force in interprovincial relations) which counseled the weakening of one's neighbor and rival by keeping him in a certain state of internal instability. (Halperín Donghi 1972: 348)

The prevalence of such practices meant, among other things, that the internal opponents of a given provincial regime

were constrained to seek support from the rulers of adjacent or rival provinces or states, lending a self-fulfilling quality to charges of treason and providing further pretext for repression, which was typically conducted via:

(3) confiscations of property and extralegal coercion to drive out or silence opponents (in Rosas's case, via the mobilization of a terror apparatus based on patron-client ties to urban plebeians).

The social and geographic loci of these and related practices are depicted in Table 3.1. As suggested by the vacant fourth cell of the table, the low degree of inter-provincial communication and circulation largely precluded cross-provincial plebeian movements. (Some interpreters present the Artiguista movement of 1813-1820 as plebeian resistance to the Buenos Aires elite, while others see it as essentially an inter-elite conflict. Certainly Artigas did go further than any other elite actor in mobilizing plebeians and in presenting programmatic appeals to their interests, especially land reform.)

Table 3.1. Political practices in the Río de la Plata, 1830s-1840s

	Intra-Provincial	Inter-Provincial
Intra-Elite	Rural-based uprisings against city-centered provincial state Confiscations or embargo of opponents' property, as routine form of resource extraction by state State terror: exemplary murders, decapitations, disembowelings (*degollamiento*), etc., aimed at forcing opponents into hiding, flight, exile	Warfare between provincial states Networks among caudillos linked by patron-client ties Diplomacy and formation of inter-provincial pacts External intervention in internal provincial affairs
Elite-Plebeian	Banditry Rural guerrillas (*montoneras*) Patron-client relationships Participation in state's terror apparatus (*La Mazorca*)	

NOTES

1. A *reglamento* dated October 12, 1778, established "a free and protected trade" by lowering tariffs on goods traded between ports of the Empire, ended the monopoly of Cadiz and Seville, and opened free communications between peninsular ports and Spanish America. (Lynch 1989: 352)

"Not to be confused with the free trade of later years, the policy of comercio libre was designed to garner revenues for Madrid, not so much through new taxation as through an increased total volume of transactions with the colonies." (Whigham 1991: 12)

2. *Gaucho* has long carried a surplus of meaning in the Argentine context. Perhaps originating from an indigenous word meaning "orphan," it was being used in a pejorative sense by the 1780s, in reference to "escaped criminals who stole cattle. . . ." (Slatta 1983: 9-10) The term entered political discourse in the epoch of Rosas: "In public it was used as a term of esteem and perpetuated the idea that the gaucho, like the estanciero, was a model of native virtues and that the interests of both were identical. . . . In private, however, especially in police usage, gaucho meant *vago, mal entretenido* [vagrant, dissolute], delinquent. The first usage represented political propaganda. The pejorative meaning expressed class distinction, social prejudices, and economic attitudes." (Lynch 1981: 113)

3. Again, recent reassessments of Rosas ascribe greater autonomy to the caudillo and to the personalist state he constructed in Buenos Aires; they express skepticism regarding claims that Rosas faithfully represented the interests of the landowning class. See above, Chapter 2, note 6.

4. *Conquistador del Desierto* -- while *desierto* is customarily rendered into English as "desert," I find that "wilderness" better conveys the word's connotations in this context. The pampas landscape -- anything but a desert in the topographic or climatic sense -- was perceived and portrayed by porteños as an alien, barbaric space that had to be civilized through conquest and settlement.