



Classical Liberalism in Argentina, from 1816 to 1884

Alejandro Gómez¹ and Nicolás Cachanosky²

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The Spanish empire created the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata in 1776 as part of the Bourbon reforms aimed at improving the administration of American colonies. King Carlos III created this new viceroyalty by detaching territories from the Viceroyalty of Peru, incorporating the Potosí silver mines, and opening the port of Buenos Aires following the 1778 Regulation of Free Trade between Spain and its colonies. The previously marginal Río de la Plata region gained significance, a development that led to the establishment of the Consulate of Commerce of Buenos Aires in 1794.

In 1808, the Spanish monarchy was replaced by Napoleon's brother, José I Bonaparte; the Spanish king was now a prisoner of the French. The turmoil triggered within Spain itself the Spanish War of Independence—independence from France, that is. But a parallel movement occurred in America, sparking debates about the locus of legitimate authority, even if the colonies were not yet proposing to break from Spain. Should power reside with the Regency Council or revert to the local populace?

On May 25, 1810, the Cabildo Abierto de Buenos Aires, a town council, argued that sovereignty reverted to the people, and it deposed Viceroy Baltazar Hidalgo de Cisneros. The move led to the formation of the First Junta, which would hold royal power until Ferdinand VII's return to the Spanish throne in 1813. Fernando VII's annulment of the 1812 Constitution of Cadiz and the pro-monarchist stance of the 1815 Congress of Vienna signaled resistance to revolutionary changes in American territories. But colonists responded, issuing

1. Universidad del CEMA, 1054 Buenos Aires, Argentina.

2. Center for Free Enterprise, University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, TX 79968.

their Declaration of Independence from Spain on July 9, 1816.

In 1816, most of the region's economy was largely based on livestock with low levels of value added. Silver mines in Potosí, still a source of income today for Argentina, were lost in 1810 when the region was lost. After independence, Argentina suffered a lack of investment in infrastructure, to keep roads and ports in usable conditions, limiting the economy's potential. The country suffered from a limited labor force, unprotected property rights, and armed conflicts. The economy saw a few changes between 1810 and 1830, such as the addition of sheep and salting houses, but not much transpired until the implementation of the classical liberal project during mid-1850s.

Post-independence, Argentina faced numerous challenges in consolidating its territories and resolving key issues, such as the ownership of customs revenues and the choice of a national capital. Buenos Aires, the wealthiest province, resisted ceding control of its port city to the other provinces or a federal government. Another major debate was the form of government—constitutional monarchy, confederate state, unitary republic, or federal republic. The need to think about the form of government was, in part, what allowed a group of classical liberal thinkers to influence the discussions about the future of the country.

In the early 1820s, the newly named United Provinces of the Río de la Plata experienced civil wars over governance and the fate of Buenos Aires's customs revenue. Initially dominated by the faction favoring a unitary republic led by Bernardino Rivadavia, and later dominated by the federal faction under Juan Manuel de Rosas, Buenos Aires represented contrasting visions: Rivadavia's Enlightenment-inspired liberal reforms versus Rosas's conservative and reactionary policies. Despite setbacks, Enlightenment liberalism gradually took root, especially through figures like Manuel Belgrano and Mariano Moreno, and later through the influential Generation of '37.

The defeat of Rosas at the Battle of Caseros in 1852 paved the way for the 1853 Constitution, embodying Juan Bautista Alberdi's liberal ideas. In this article we proceed into the aftermath of the 1853 Constitution, with the intention of picking up the story around 1884, the year of Alberdi's death, in an article to follow.³

3. In this article, all translation from Spanish to English is our own unless otherwise specified.

Antecedents and diffusion of Enlightenment ideas in El Plata

Beyond the historiographical debate on the influence of European and American ideas and events, it is clear that ideas played a fundamental role in promoting and legitimizing the Latin American independence movement. In the specific case of the Río de la Plata, the events of 1806 and 1807, known as the English Invasions, awakened patriotic sentiment among the *criollos*⁴ of Buenos Aires in response to the inaction of the colonial authorities.

Modern ideological influences did not come solely from France, England, and the United States. Spanish thinkers, such as Benito Jerónimo Feijoo (1676–1764), who authored the multivolume works *Teatro Crítico Universal* and *Cartas Eruditas*, demonstrated a critical approach to knowledge previously considered irrefutable. Feijoo questioned established beliefs in various disciplines, including art, literature, history, philosophy, theology, mathematics, geography, and the natural sciences. The works of Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes (1723–1802) and Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos (1744–1811), who was heavily influenced by Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, also significantly impacted Spanish-American lawyers.

Nonetheless, the primary intellectual sources for political figures like Francisco de Miranda, Pedro Fermín de Vargas, Antonio Nariño, Simón Bolívar, Moreno, Belgrano, and Rivadavia were not Spaniards but other European thinkers, including Isaac Newton, John Locke, Adam Smith, René Descartes, Montesquieu, Denis Diderot, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. We do not mean to suggest that the *criollo* public was much aware of all their works or that they were widely read and discussed. However, the Enlightenment provided a new vision of knowledge, challenging traditional authority based on tradition (Lynch 2001, 31–33), and the cutting edge was associated with thinkers from Britain and France.

The dissemination of these ideas, in gazettes throughout colonial America, was crucial. These publications became agents of modern public opinion, spreading modern thought and presenting projects influenced by new ideologies. In Río de la Plata in the early 19th century, the notable publications included *Telógrafo Mercantil, Rural, Político Económico e Historiográfico del Río de la Plata* by Francisco Cabello y Mesa, *Semanario de Agricultura, Industria y Comercio* (Semanario) by Hipólito Vieytes, and *Correo de Comercio*, directed by Belgrano.

Another important medium for spreading ideas was through *tertulias*, which

4. A *criollo* is a term used in reference to individuals of full Spanish descent who were born in America. The word *criollo* does not refer to a social class.

were traditional gatherings of the *criollo* elites. The nascent middle class had its equivalent in coffeehouse gatherings. This environment of increased idea dissemination and debate led to the formation of formal groups such as the *Sociedades de Amigos del País*, where new concepts were not only discussed but also applied to promote societal progress. Another venue for the dissemination of ideas was universities, though there were none in Buenos Aires at the time.

Debates arose about the legitimacy of the new government and the type of institutions that should govern the country. During the first three decades of its independence, Argentina experienced a back-and-forth between attempts to implement liberal reforms and conservative reactions from those whose privileges were threatened. The intrinsic instability of successive governments from 1810 onwards made it difficult to establish a stable ideological and political foundation. The instability led to the emergence of the *caudillo*—a leader with military and political power, as a representative of order in a world filled with uncertainty. The changes proposed by intellectuals and the new ruling class disrupted the traditional corporate order, especially within the Church and the Army. The new ideas promoted a secular state, freedom of thought and expression, and a market economy, all of which challenged the traditional order and provoked resistance from sectors that saw their privileges and socio-cultural heritage threatened. Generally, the new ideas were embraced by an intellectual elite that believed in the need for change and progress but did not find the same support among the lower classes, who were rooted in the centuries-old customs of the colonial period.

Manuel Belgrano

Belgrano (1770–1820) is recognized as one of the founding fathers of Argentina, notably for his having created the national flag on February 27, 1812, and his military campaigns during the struggle for independence. Less well known, however, is his role in introducing Enlightenment ideas to the Río de la Plata between 1795 and 1810. Born into one of the most prominent merchant families in the viceroyalty, his parents had envisioned a significant role for him in the family business. After studying at the Colegio de San Carlos in Buenos Aires, he traveled to Spain in 1786 to continue his education, first in Salamanca and then in Valladolid, where he earned a Bachelor of Laws degree.



Belgrano

Belgrano assimilated ideas from Francis Bacon's scientific method, Diderot

and d'Alembert, and Locke's political theories on democracy, equality, personal freedom, and the right to trade and property (Cortés Conde 2013, 47). According to his 1814 memoirs, his greatest knowledge came not from academic study but from daily interactions with thinkers and men of letters in social gatherings where the events shaping Europe and North America were discussed. Reflecting on his time in Spain during the French Revolution, Belgrano said, "The ideas of liberty, equality, and property took possession of me, and I saw only tyrants in those who opposed these rights" (Belgrano 1963, 18). These discussions sparked his interest in political economy and led him to read authors such as François Quesnay, Adam Smith, Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes, and Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos.

Quesnay, who advocated for minimal interference in economic activities, significantly influenced Belgrano, who embraced the motto *laissez faire, laissez passer*. As Cortés Conde (2013, 48) points out, Belgrano also read Ferdinando Galiani and Antonio Genovesi, adopting the concepts that the price of a good is determined by individual valuations, and that there will be inflation if too much currency is supplied to the market.

Upon returning to the Río de la Plata in 1794, Belgrano became Secretary of the newly created Consulate of Commerce of Buenos Aires, an appointment likely due to his father's influence. He promoted Physiocratic ideas through initiatives aimed at agriculture, education, industry, and free trade. In his *Memorias del Consulado*, Belgrano detailed the initiatives he proposed and the obstacles he faced from colonial authorities and resistant merchants. Belgrano (1963, 63–82) believed that agriculture is the true destiny of man and advocated for its promotion in his reports.

In his 1798 memoir, he made a strong case for free trade, quoting Quesnay's maxims that foreign trade of fruits should not be impeded and that complete freedom of commerce ensures the prosperity of the nation and state (Belgrano 1963, 88–89). Despite these modernizing attempts, which failed to inspire prospective farmers, Belgrano sought to create the *Sociedad Patriótica, Literaria y Económica del Río de la Plata* to promote arts, sciences, literature, industry, commerce, and agriculture, though this project also failed to find robust support.

Belgrano contributed to the *Telégrafo Mercantil* and aided the founding by Juan Hipólito Vieytes of the *Semanario de Agricultura, Industria y Comercio*, which published Physiocratic ideas and those of Adam Smith. Belgrano and Vieytes were among the few in Buenos Aires with copies of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Rojas 2010, 54).

In March 1810, just before the May Revolution, Viceroy Cisneros asked Belgrano to edit the journal *Correo de Comercio*, which continued under Vieytes until 1811. In an article titled "Comercio" on August 25, 1810, Belgrano (1963) emphasized the need to promote various economic activities and defended the self-determination of prices.

Following his service in the Primera Junta between May and September

1810, Belgrano's main activities involved commanding troops in the independence battles in Paraguay and the northern border with Alto Perú. Though never trained as a military man, he actively participated in the conflict. His new role distanced him from writing, though he occasionally returned to issues related to education, another of his major concerns. While his ideas did not immediately take hold in the new national government, they helped set a course that would be realized in the second half of the nineteenth century with the 1853 Constitution, which embodied principles of free trade, property rights, and the promotion of agriculture, infrastructure, and education.

Mariano Moreno

Mariano Moreno (1778–1811), born in Buenos Aires to a Spanish father and a *criolla* mother, was one of the most important literary figures of the 1810 May Revolution. In 1790, at the age of twelve, he entered the Royal College of San Carlos, and after completing his studies in 1799, he traveled to Chuquisaca, Alto Perú, to study theology with the intention of becoming a priest. He switched to law, however, eventually becoming a lawyer at the same university. During this period, Moreno was influenced by Enlightenment authors such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Jovellanos, Volney, Gaetano Filangieri, Cesare Beccaria, Nicolas de Condorcet, and Henri François d'Aguesseau.

When Moreno graduated in 1802, he presented his dissertation on the servitude of the indigenous people, particularly the *yanaconas* and *mitayos*. The dissertation defended the indigenous people, evoking the works of Bartolomé de Las Casas. Moreno's Enlightenment influence is evident when he speaks of the native freedom of the indigenous people, introducing the concept of *jusnaturalism*. He wrote that "freedom is native to these given rights from birth, which we therefore call 'natural'" (Terán 2008, 27). Although this writing did not cause legal problems, it earned him the social and commercial rejection of the influential mining sector of Potosí, banning him from getting a professional job.

Consequently, in 1805, he returned to Buenos Aires with his wife and son.

Moreno, like other Enlightenment scholars of his time, lived in an era of profound and unpredictable change. His generation had seen the extreme outcomes of applying new ideas, such as the French Revolution, which led to the Terror and then the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. As reflected in his 1802 writing,



Moreno

Moreno did not openly attack the monarchy but criticized the viceregal bureaucracy and the abuses against the indigenous people. Additionally, upon returning to Buenos Aires, he sought employment as a lawyer within the viceregal hierarchy, avoiding direct opposition to the monarchical system. He waited through events such as the English invasions of 1806–1807 and Napoleon's invasion of Spain, that changed the political landscape.

In November 1805, Moreno joined the lawyers' union at the Real Audiencia in Buenos Aires. He was appointed substitute relator in 1806, placing him in a prominent position within the viceregal society. During these years, Moreno developed a bureaucratic career in the colonial government, presenting legal writings defending freedom. In 1809, amid trade disruptions between Spain and its colonies due to problems in the peninsula, he wrote one of his most notable works in defense of free trade, *Representación de los Labradores y Hacendados*. By that time a new viceroy, Baltazar Hidalgo de Cisneros, had been appointed by the peninsular Central Junta. This text, which appeared under Moreno's signature in 1810, is the first *criollo* writing in favor of free trade in Argentina (Goldman 2016, 16).

In the *Representación*, Moreno, influenced by Filangieri, opposed the privileges of the monopoly merchants of Cadiz, advocating for individual political and economic rights. He insisted that the colonies, which had gained the legal status of *Provincias de Ultramar* as of the Royal Order of the Junta Central of January 22, 1809, had the right to claim free trade (Goldman 2016, 133). He argued for liberalizing trade with the English to prevent Spain's economic ruin, asserting that using English ships would sustain commerce disrupted by a lack of a Spanish merchant marine (Terán 2008, 30–31).

Moreno's *Representación* recognizes the international division of labor advocated by Smith, whose ideas Moreno knew indirectly by reading Jovellanos. He stated: "Interest and calculation must be allowed to act freely, as they will regulate circulation better than any establishment. Let the merchants do as they see fit, and they will level the course for the common benefit of rapid speculations" (Moreno 1915, 175). Regarding objections from the Consulate of Cadiz about free trade and the outflow of silver from royal coffers, Moreno responded that silver is merely a conventional sign representing marketable goods and should be treated like any other product (*ibid.*, 156).

Moreno's moderate stance shifted with the May Revolution of 1810, which replaced Viceroy Cisneros with the First Government Junta, of which Moreno served as Secretary of War and Government. He also became the main editor of *La Gaceta de Buenos Aires*, the official government organ created on June 2, 1810. From this platform, he fought for press freedom, the honoring of state officials, and the abolition of noble titles and castes. Among his initiatives was the publication, in parts, of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, which he translated into Spanish. Despite

objections a classical liberal may have regarding Rousseau, he has been a major influence in emancipation movements. Moreno introduced Rousseau's work with one of his most famous phrases: "If peoples are not enlightened, if their rights are not universalized, if each man does not know what he is worth, what he can [do] and what is owed to him, new illusions will succeed the old ones, and after hesitating for some time among a thousand uncertainties, it will perhaps be our lot to change tyrants, without destroying tyranny" (Moreno 1915, 266). To promote independence, it was mandated, especially in rural areas, that Rousseau's *Social Contract* be read from pulpits.

Moreno's prominence grew, as did his opposition. Political issues eventually led him to resign from the provisional government junta and embark on a diplomatic mission to London. He left Buenos Aires on January 22, 1811, unaware it would be his final departure. He died at sea on March 4, only 32 years old, and his remains were cast into the ocean. To this day, there is debate about whether his death was due to an accidental overdose of medicine given by the ship's captain or a deliberate act to cause his demise.

Bernardino Rivadavia

Bernardino Rivadavia (1780–1845), unlike the two figures mentioned above, did not receive formal higher education. He only attended some courses at the Real Colegio de San Carlos in Buenos Aires before his father withdrew him to follow a career in commerce. Despite this, Rivadavia played an active role during the 1806–1807 English invasions, earning the appointment of Royal Ensign, a significant position granted by the Cabildo. This enabled him to participate in the Cabildo Abierto on May 22, 1810, which led to the dismissal of Viceroy Cisneros on May 25. When the First Triumvirate was established in September 1811, Rivadavia was elected Secretary of War. In this role, he signed several decrees reflecting his adherence to Enlightenment ideas. In October 1811, the government enacted a law ensuring freedom of expression, guaranteeing the publication of ideas without prior censorship. In November of the same year, the Individual Security Law guaranteed the protection of life, liberty, and property, a law promoted by Rivadavia himself. In April 1812, the Triumvirate abolished the slave trade, and in September, trade was freed for locals and foreigners (K. Gallo 2012, 15–18).

At the end of 1814, the government, now led by a Supreme Director, sent



Rivadavia

Rivadavia along with Belgrano on a diplomatic mission to Europe to negotiate the arrival of a European prince to govern the Río de la Plata. By 1815, with the defeat of Napoleon and the restoration of European monarchies, advocating for a republic would not facilitate the recognition of the new government in El Plata. However, the negotiations failed, and the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata declared their independence on July 9, 1816. Belgrano stayed in Europe only one year, but Rivadavia remained for almost six years, primarily in London and Paris. During this time, he established close contacts with figures such as Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, Antoine Destutt de Tracy, and the Abbé Dominique de Pradt, who supported the independence of Spanish colonies and the establishment of republican governments (K. Gallo 2012, 43).

In 1821, Rivadavia returned to Buenos Aires, where the provinces had rejected the 1819 Constitution and there was no unified government. In July 1821, Martín Rodríguez, the Governor of Buenos Aires Province, appointed Rivadavia Minister of Government and Foreign Affairs, a position he held until 1824. During this period, he implemented many ideas he had absorbed in Europe. Rivadavia's reformist program, which applied only to Buenos Aires Province, included:

- the law of universal suffrage granting voting rights to all free men over 20;
- ecclesiastical reforms suppressing some religious orders, establishing freedom of worship, and ending the obligation to pay tithes, thereby reducing the Church's power;
- military reforms to significantly cut public spending;
- a broad law on freedom of expression to promote new ideas; and
- the creation of the University of Buenos Aires, offering a secular and "modern" curriculum (K. Gallo 2012, 72–88).

On August 26, 1822, Rivadavia wrote to Bentham, one of his intellectual mentors, detailing his administrative progress:

Thus, you will know that I have dedicated myself to reforming the old abuses of all kinds in the administration of the Junta of Representatives and its dignity; to encouraging the establishment of a national bank on a sound basis; to reforming, with fair indemnity, the civil and military employees who were a burden on the State; to protecting individual security with laws; to executing recognized public works; to protecting trade, sciences, and arts; to passing a law reducing customs duties; to implementing a much-needed ecclesiastical reform, which I hope to obtain: in a word, to making all the advantageous changes, inspired by your honorable approbation, and having the strength to promote and carry them out. (K. Gallo 2012, 93)

Rivadavia's tenure concluded at the time of the election of a new governor, Gregorio Las Heras, who praised his administration as a "happy experience." Rivadavia then embarked on a diplomatic mission to Europe, where he secured the signing of a Treaty of Friendship, Navigation, and Commerce with England, and a loan from Baring Brothers for modernizing the port, founding three towns on the southern border of the province, and implementing a running-water system in the city. The loan, however, was ultimately used in the war against Brazil, which led to Uruguay's independence in 1828.

Beyond his brief stint as Argentina's first president between 1826 and 1827, Rivadavia faced numerous challenges. The internal and external contexts were not conducive to his reforms, and he encountered growing opposition as his initiatives dismantled old privileges. By 1829, the unitary-republic faction he led was losing power to the federal faction under Juan Manuel de Rosas, who reversed many of Rivadavia's reforms. Forced into exile, he lived first in Colonia, Uruguay (1829–30), then Paris (1830–34), and returned to Uruguay (1834–39), where he was detained for a couple of years. In 1839, after his release, he moved to Cádiz, where he died on September 2, 1845.

The Generation of '37

By 1837, Juan Manuel de Rosas had been governing the Province of Buenos Aires for two years, with additional powers (he had previously held the same position between 1829 and 1832). In this context, a group of young intellectuals from Buenos Aires and the interior, frustrated by the lack of freedoms and a national constitution, proposed a modernizing project aligned with contemporary developments in parts of Europe and the United States. These young people, most born during the emergence of the national government, saw themselves as well-qualified to direct the country's future, grounding their principles in the romantic current of thought (Halperín Donghi 1995, 10–11).

Oscar Terán has written about the generation of '37:

[They are] considered the first intellectual movement animated by a purpose of interpreting Argentine reality, emphasizing the need to build a national identity. Its most recognized members are Esteban Echeverría, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Juan Bautista Alberdi, Juan María Gutiérrez, Vicente Fidel López, José Mármol, and Félix Frías. Beginning with the creation of the *Salón Literario* in 1837, it had a period of creativity that lasted until approximately 1880, during which its romantic ideology achieved cultural hegemony and was later displaced by other tendencies. (Terán 2008, 61)

When, in 1838, Rosas decided to close the *Salón Literario*, a space created

by these young people to discuss ideas forbidden by the Rosas regime, Alberdi and Echeverría founded the *Asociación de la Joven Argentina* to continue promoting these ideas, which they saw as a continuation of the patriots' ideas from the May Revolution.

We talk in more detail about Alberdi, a major figure in Argentinian classical liberal thought, below. Yet, at this point is worth quoting a passage by him where, years later, he reflects about this time:

At that time, I came into close contact with two very illustrious young men who greatly influenced my studies and literary interests: Don Juan María Gutiérrez and Don Esteban Echeverría. They exercised on me that indirect mentorship, more effective than that of the schools, which is simple friendship between equals. Our interactions, walks, and conversations were constant, free studies, often mingled with worldly amusements and pastimes. From Echeverría, who had been educated in France during the Restoration, I first learned about Lerminier, Villemain, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Lamartine, Byron, and what was then called Romanticism, as opposed to the old classical school. I had studied philosophy at the University by Condillac and Locke. For years, I was absorbed by the free readings of Helvetius, Cabanis, Holbach, Bentham, Rousseau. To Echeverría, I owed the evolution of my mind with the readings of Victor Cousin, Villemain, Chateaubriand, Jouffroy, and all the eclectics from Germany favoring what was called spiritualism. (Alberdi 1895, 294–295)

Additionally, Alberdi was well-versed in authors such as Volney, d'Holbach, Buffon, Smith, Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, Frédéric Bastiat, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Immanuel Kant, and was familiar with the *Federalist*.

Esteban Echeverría, a leading exponent of this generation and the author of *The Socialist Dogma* in 1846, had experienced romantic ideology firsthand during his stay in Paris between 1825 and 1830. There, he encountered Constant and Destutt de Tracy, gaining insight into the eclectic thinking of the French and Germans. He later engaged with Tocqueville, Michel Chevalier, and Achille Murat. Under these philosophical influences, these young Argentines sought to implement these new ideas in the Río de la Plata. Echeverría, who passed in 1851 before the fall of Rosas, was a classical liberal whose literary work against Rosas is well remembered.

When Rosas's repression became unbearable, most of these young intellectuals emigrated, primarily to Uruguay or Chile, where they continued to publish their romantic ideology. Unlike Enlightenment rationality, romanticism proposed "a turn towards subjectivity itself, seeking the most original and specific elements," and proclaimed "a predilection for the exceptional over the conventional, admiring the great man, the genius, the hero; in short, the individual over collective agreements" (Terán 2008, 62). On the socio-cultural plane, romanticism valued

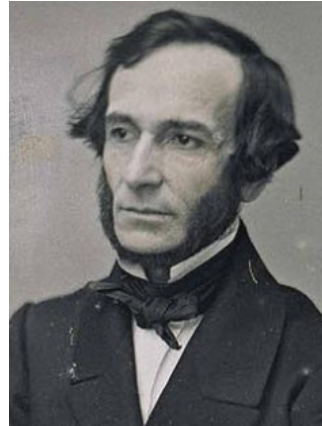
the authentic, the idiosyncratic, and the distinctive of each culture and nation, as opposed to enlightened cosmopolitanism, emphasizing “the uses and customs of each nation, to which imports from other cultural areas must surrender, advocating that laws should be adapted to these particularities” (ibid., 63). The romanticist approach took these young people in different directions. Some supported a more interventionist state, while others, like Alberdi, leaned towards classical liberalism. Alberdi’s thought in particular would significantly influence the country’s development in the following decades.

It is worth noting that the Generation of 1837 authors were not invested in a naïve transplantation of foreign ideas. Their discussions and contributions revolved around *adapting* classical liberal principles to the circumstances of Argentina.

Juan B. Alberdi: To the 1853 Constitution and after

Juan Bautista Alberdi was born in the Province of Tucumán on August 29, 1810, to a Spanish father and an Argentine mother. Upon completing his primary studies, he relocated to Buenos Aires to attend the College of Moral Sciences. As detailed in his autobiography, he found the school’s discipline unbearable and took a hiatus before deciding to return and resume his studies. During this break, he encountered influential works such as Volney’s *Les Ruines*, which instilled in him the maxim, “preserve yourself, educate yourself, moderate yourself.”

During Alberdi’s studies he encountered two individuals who significantly influenced his life: his friend Miguel Cané and the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Alberdi was deeply influenced by Rousseau’s works, including *The New Heloise*, *Emile*, and *The Social Contract*. From Cané, with whom Alberdi maintained a lifelong friendship, he acquired a desire to study jurisprudence at the University of Buenos Aires, ultimately completing his studies at the University of Córdoba, earning a Bachelor in Civil Law in 1834. Following his exile in 1838 during the Rosas regime, he received the title of Lawyer in Montevideo in 1840. In 1844, he obtained his Doctor of Jurisprudence degree in Chile (Linares Quintana 1987, 119–122).



Alberdi

Governor Rosas was always suspicious of young intellectuals, particularly

during the French blockade of the port of Buenos Aires, lasting almost 30 months between 1838 and 1840. This period marked the onset of systematic suppression of intellectual activity, prompting many intellectuals to opt for exile. Before departing for Montevideo at the age of 26, Alberdi wrote *El Fragmento Preliminar al Estudio del Derecho*. This work hinted at the philosophical direction he would later take in *Bases*, a foundational text for the liberal Constitution of 1853. In *El Fragmento*, Alberdi advocated for evolutionary change, suggesting that laws should be as general and as few as possible to liberate human creativity. He believed in allowing progress to unfold naturally without hastening changes abruptly. He feared and distrusted governments with unlimited powers. He argued that the best safeguards against despotism were periodic elections, the division of power, and the publicity of government acts—all essential to the republican system (Risolia 1987, 223–224).

In Montevideo, Alberdi mingled with other exiles such as Rivera Indarte, Bartolomé Mitre, Florencio Varela, Esteban Echeverría, and Juan Lavalle, as well as his friend Juan María Gutiérrez, with whom he later embarked on his first trip to Europe. Upon returning from Europe, he bypassed Buenos Aires and proceeded directly to Chile, arriving in Valparaíso on April 15, 1844. At that time, the Argentine exile community in Chile was significant, including Julián Segundo de Agüero, Valentín Alsina, Florencio Varela, Juan Gregorio de Las Heras, Félix Frías, the Rodríguez Peña brothers, Juan María and Juan Antonio Gutiérrez, Mariano Sarreatea, Domingo Sarmiento, Carlos Tejedor, and Mariano Fraguero. Chile provided these exiles with the freedom necessary to develop and debate their ideas on Argentine politics. Both Santiago and Valparaíso became hubs for the political disputes that would shape Argentina from 1852 onwards, particularly between those defending the interests of the Province of Buenos Aires and those advocating for the other provinces of the Argentine Confederation (Mayer 1969, 8–10).

During his stay in Chile, Alberdi earned his Doctorate in jurisprudence and contributed to *El Mercurio* before founding the newspaper *El Comercio*, all while practicing law. His residence became a gathering place for exiles eagerly awaiting news from the Río de la Plata regarding Juan Manuel de Rosas (Mayer 1969, 11). In 1847, Alberdi wrote a work that significantly impacted the Argentine exile community: *La República Argentina, 37 Años Después de su Revolución*. In it, he highlighted the Rosista order as a necessary condition for achieving economic prosperity (Halperín Donghi 1995, 16). This recognition of Rosas was poorly received by his exiled compatriots, who did not understand his reasoning. By the early 1850s, the situation in Argentina began to change, prompting some exiles to return and support Justo José de Urquiza, the leader of the alliance against Rosas' troops. The conflict culminated in the Battle of Caseros on February 3, 1852, where Urquiza triumphed over Rosas. Alberdi, who closely followed these events from Valparaíso, then wrote one of his most distinguished works, *Bases*, which became a

touchstone for the constituent deputies drafting the new constitution in 1853.

Philosophical influences on Alberdi

As Jorge Mayer points out in his introductory note to *Bases*, “Alberdi’s thought is shaped by various doctrinal influences that are easy to identify. Philosophically, he is imbued with the ideals of the May Revolution, evident in his writings from *The Descriptive Memory of Tucumán* to *The Republic Consolidated* in 1880. Montesquieu, his significant ideological mentor, emphasized the role of circumstances, time, and place in shaping human conditions and the balance of spiritual values” (Mayer 1969, 47).

Alberdi was also exposed to the ideas of Jean Louis Lerminier, a professor of comparative law at the Collège de France and a contributor to the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Lerminier expounded on the doctrines of Friedrich Carl von Savigny, which viewed law as a dynamic, evolving aspect of nature.

Regarding economics, Alberdi drew significant inspiration from Jean-Baptiste Say, a Protestant industrialist and professor at the Collège de France. Say, a follower of Smith, advocated for an economy free from state constraints based on practical, experiential teachings.

Starting from 1850, Alberdi’s intellectual framework was further enriched by the works of Chevalier, particularly regarding immigration and railways. Concerning constitutional matters, Alberdi turned to North American doctrines, including the writings of Joseph Story, *The Federalist*, the Constitution of 1787, the California Constitution, the Massachusetts Constitution, and the teachings of Pellegrino Rossi (Mayer 1969, 48–49).

Political thought of Alberdi

Alberdi’s political vision aimed to establish a constitution that would foster population growth, expand railways and navigation, and promote provincial development. Other elements included canal development, land colonization, industrialization, and foreign capital importation. He elaborates on institutional pathways in his seminal works, *Bases* and *Sistema Económico y Rentístico*. Alberdi advocates for a market economy as the catalyst for progress, emphasizing the government’s vital role in safeguarding property rights and individual freedoms (Botana 1977, 44–45).

When forming a national government, Alberdi, like many nineteenth-century liberals, feared the excesses of the masses and the radicalism of advocates of reform. He echoes the warnings of Tocqueville and Constant. In *Bases*, he advocates for both a pure liberalism in economic and social spheres and a conservative

or politically tempered liberalism, and may thus be classed a conservative liberal. Alberdi was apprehensive about expanded political freedoms during Argentina's specific historical context, in light of the French revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848. False enthusiasms might jeopardize individual liberties (Terán 2008, 96). He staunchly upheld the principle of limited government and the supremacy of civil society over public authority, evident in *Bases*, *Peregrinación de Luz de Día*, and *La Omnipotencia del Estado* (E. L. Gallo 2008, 155).

According to Alberdi, the constitution serves as the nation's fundamental law, a tool not to constrain individuals but to liberate citizens, enabling them to reach upward. In his perspective, the true reformer differentiates himself from a ruler bent on enacting specific laws, establishing monopolies, or favoring certain inhabitants at others' expense (Botana 1984, 315). He proposed a constitution that guarantees everyone the freedom to pursue their work and interests openly. Thus, the Constitution becomes a "great law that favors freedom by repealing the numerous laws that once bound us in servitude" (Alberdi 1886, IV:208). Ultimately, he advocated for a government that enables individuals to pursue their endeavors freely while safeguarding their private property. Laws, according to him, should constrain rulers, not the ruled (Botana 1984, 316).

Alberdi flatly rejected the appointment of authorities through inheritance or succession, although in his posthumous writings, particularly *La Monarquía Como Mejor Forma del Gobierno de Sud América* written between 1862 and 1863, he occasionally showed a preference for this system. Regarding the American Founders, he opposed the aristocratic positions of Alexander Hamilton and Gouverneur Morris. He accepted the republican views held by James Wilson, George Mason, and James Madison. Alberdi emphasized how this democratic option would manifest, rejecting direct election by the people, as he believed they were not prepared for it. Instead, he favored a system of indirect voting, with the people remaining the source of governmental legitimacy.

Alberdi's idea is captured in his *possible* and *true* republics. The former refers to a society where the lack of knowledge and limited democratic practices—and culture—impede citizens from enjoying their political rights at their full capacity. Over time, a more mature society, one that would have deeply adopted democratic practices and principles, would reach a *true republic*, where citizens enjoy their political rights at their full capacity.

As Natalio Botana (1977, 50–51) argues, the Alberdian system has two republics, the restrictive and the open. In the restrictive, the right to vote and govern is limited to those capable of exercising these functions. In the open, all other national and foreign inhabitants are included, enjoying all civil liberties and rights. This distinction between inhabitant and citizen was common among conservative liberal thinkers of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One

of the most influential on Alberdi was Tocqueville, particularly through his work *Democracy in America*.

Economic thought of Alberdi

In *Bases* and, especially, in *Sistema Económico y Rentístico*, Alberdi articulates his vision of the economy's role in societal progress. He believed that the new economy, driven by the free market and the Industrial Revolution, would benefit the country significantly. His economic project required a favorable political context that provided order, security, and freedom to attract the necessary investments and immigrants. Halperín Donghi writes:

For Alberdi, the appeal to foreign labor and capital constitutes the best instrument for the accelerated economic change that Argentina requires. The country needs population; its economic life also needs protagonists willing in advance to guide its conduct in the ways that the new economy demands. As befits a time when an investment has not yet fully adopted the corporate forms that will soon dominate it, Alberdi does not completely separate labor immigration from capital immigration, which he sees fundamentally as that of capitalists. (Halperín Donghi 1995, 31)

Alberdi expected very much from economic change, believing it would bring about the social and political transformations necessary to transition the country from a potential republic to a true republic. As subsequent history has often proven, the expectation was overly hopeful.

Alberdi's *Bases* and *Sistema Económico y Rentístico*

The *Bases*

The *Bases* (1852) is a proposal where the civilization of the individual and the civilization of things coexisted, the order that is born from the spontaneous exercise of freedom and the society made up of the railroad and industry. Botana (1984, 309) describes it as a dialogue between Smith and Chevalier, where at some points the role of individual freedom prevails, and at others, it is represented by the immigrant who carries with him his foreign life experience. In *Bases*, the source of freedom is customs, one of the essential components to bring his homeland out of backwardness. The other essential components are discussed in the *Sistema Económico and Rentístico*. If *Bases* is a political-institutional project, *Sistema Económico y Rentístico* is the complementary economic policy.

Bases was not a theoretical treatise on constitutional law but rather a work

aimed at modernizing the country by dismantling the barriers imposed by centuries of Spanish colonial rule. *Bases* aims to establish a republican constitution that would channel European civilization in Argentina. Alberdi's approach aligns with authors such as Smith and Say (Botana 1984, 315). Its origins can be traced back to Alberdi's earlier writings, as he himself noted in the *Cuarta Carta Quillotana* addressed to Domingo Sarmiento, dated in Valparaíso in February 1853:

The sources and origins of my book of the Bases are: Preliminar al Estudio del Derecho, 1837; my symbolic word in the Credo de la Asociación de Mayo, 1838; El Nacional de Montevideo, 1838; Crónicas de la Revolución de Mayo, 1838; El Porvenir, 1840; Memoria Sobre un Congreso Americano, 1844; Acción de la Europa en América, 1845; Treinta Siete Años Después, 1847. Here are the writings of my pen, where you will find [addresses Sarmiento] the original chapters that I have copied to the letter in the improvised book of my Bases. (Alberdi 1886, IV:93–94)

Alberdi's proposals in the book are both broad and specific. Firstly, it avoids imitating or copying models from other countries, recognizing the uniqueness of Argentine society. Secondly, it meticulously analyzes the constitutional models of neighboring countries to avoid their mistakes. Thirdly, it advocates for Anglo-Saxon immigration as a means of modernization.⁵ Fourthly, it emphasizes the education of individuals and the ethics of work. Finally, it underscores the importance of an open economic policy with the rest of the world, especially industrialized countries.

El Sistema Económico y Rentístico

Penned in Chile in 1854, *El Sistema* encapsulates Alberdi's economic ideology in the context of the 1853 Constitution. This text complements the *Bases* by expounding on economic growth and the government's role with respect to it. Alberdi draws inspiration from the Scottish tradition of spontaneous order. His proposed reforms align with a notion of negative freedom that rejects colonial mercantilism's privileges and governmental interventionism in industries and communications, seeing such intervention as contrary to the natural order of freedom (Botana 1984, 315).

In his introduction to *El Sistema*, Alberdi (1886, IV:144) explains:

The Argentine Federal Constitution encompasses a comprehensive economic

5. Alberdi's intention was to attract individuals from developed (industrialized) nations of the time, to bring their culture, civil principles, and practices.

policy, guaranteeing the free operation of labor, capital, and land as the primary agents of production (...) I aim to consolidate these provisions into a systematic body of knowledge, organizing them based on their interrelatedness and mutual dependence, to disseminate understanding and facilitate the implementation of the Constitution concerning the present and future destinies of the Argentine Republic. (Alberdi 1886, IV:144)

The book explains how the economic philosophy of the 1853 Constitution should be applied. It discusses industrial development, labor regulations, production and trade promotion, immigration, fiscal management, technical education, and trade openness with low customs duties. Throughout, Alberdi emphasizes that state intervention distorts the market and stifles individual initiative. He believes the government's primary role lies in safeguarding property and entrepreneurial freedom, eradicating any lingering economic privileges inherited from Hispanic legacy. In essence, the System serves as a guide to liberal economics:

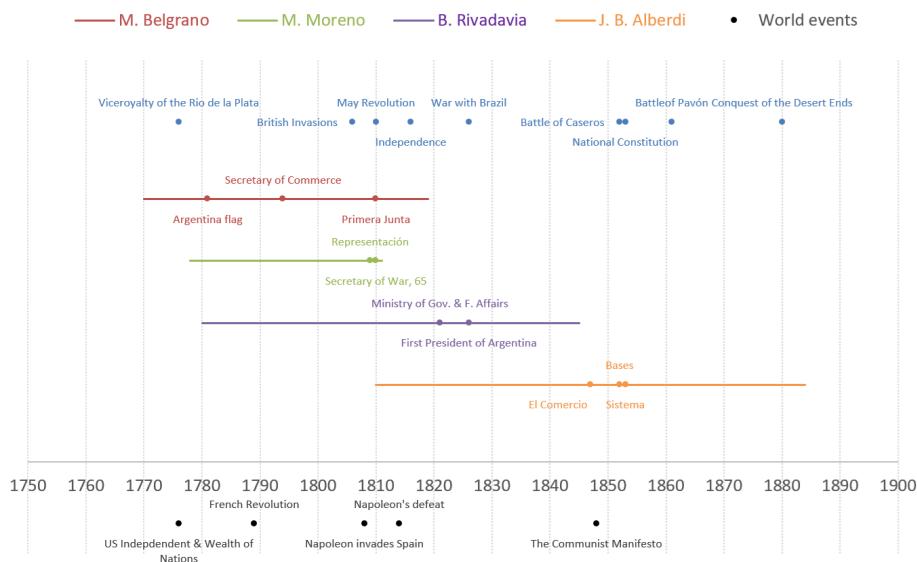
The Constitution neither creates nor bestows; it acknowledges what is inherently human, ordained by God, our original legislator. God, who made all men equal in law, endowed some with abilities and others with inadequacies, resulting in unequal fortunes—products of ability, not law. The Constitution must not tamper with God's design but reflect and affirm it. Its purpose was not to equalize fortunes but to affirm equality of rights. (Alberdi 1886, IV:255)

Alberdi's life in Europe

After spending nearly ten years in Chile, Alberdi departed for Europe, where he assumed the role of Chargé d'Affaires in France and England. Although the appointment was made on May 1, 1854, Alberdi's journey did not commence until April 15, 1855, when he embarked from the Pacific. Interestingly, Alberdi bypassed the Confederation's capital, Paraná in the province of Entre Ríos, and missed meeting President Justo José de Urquiza in person, despite Urquiza's support for Alberdi's ideas. Alberdi's European endeavors aimed at gaining recognition for the Argentine Confederation, a goal he achieved after five years of negotiations across France, Great Britain, Spain, and the Vatican.

When Bartolomé Mitre, a native of Buenos Aires, assumed the Presidency of the Confederation in 1862, he chose to terminate Alberdi's services due to their political differences during Urquiza's presidency (1854–1860). But Mitre did not deviate from the Alberdian principles. In fact, the 1865 railway law clearly shows that Mitre promoted Alberdi's principles on immigration and foreign capital. Furthermore, these ideas were defended in *La Nación*, a newspaper founded in 1870, one that still today remains a leading media outlet in Argentina. After having

his official appointment terminated, Alberdi opted to remain in Paris, to continue his studies and writing. In 1879, he was elected as a Deputy to the National Congress for his province. Consequently, in September of 1879, after forty years abroad, he returned to Argentina, albeit briefly. By 1881, he traveled back to France, where he spent the final years of his life working on his autobiography. He passed away on June 19, 1884, in a small hospital on the outskirts of Paris. His legacy endured, as his ideas were enshrined in the National Constitution. Thanks to a generation of leaders who embraced his vision, Argentina transitioned from a backward nation to, by 1910, one of the world's most advanced countries.



The impact of the 1853 Constitution

The 1853 Constitution was heavily influenced by the U.S. Constitution and Alberdi's work. It grants the provinces a high degree of *de jure* independence while establishing a strong President, limited by a bicameral legislature, and a judiciary that represents the third branch of government. This republican division of powers is replicated at the provincial level.

Since its independence in 1816, Argentina has been divided between Buenos Aires and the provinces. The defeat of Rosas in the Battle of Caseros in 1852 marked a turning point, with the provinces finally prevailing over Buenos Aires. The following year, the first national constitution was enacted in 1853. Institutionally, the 1853 Constitution is a foundational moment in Argentine history. By

embracing Alberdi's ideas, it set a strategy for national growth based on free trade and open borders, policies seen as essential for bringing wealth and populating a large country with many uninhabited areas.

However, the impact of the 1853 Constitution was not immediate. Buenos Aires refused to sign the new Constitution, and it was not until the national reunification following the Battle of Pavón in 1861 that the Constitution was applied consistently, until the 1930 coup. The 1853 Constitution was viewed as a credible and durable institutional framework, creating an environment of predictability. This, in turn, attracted an influx of foreign investment and immigrants until the 1920s. However, this outcome was not solely due to the 1853 Constitution but also to a generation of political and social leaders, known as the Generation of '80, who endorsed its underlying principles.

Comprehensive data for this period is naturally lacking. However, some variables indicate the spectacular growth Argentina experienced under the principles of the 1853 Constitution. One such variable is the expansion of the railroad, which, connecting the geographic expanse of the country and significantly reduced transportation costs. Railroad expansion was initially fostered by private, public, and mixed initiatives. Years later, the railroad business converged to be mostly a private endeavour. Investment in railroad expansion also became a conduit for modern business administration practices that were later applied to other sectors. The railroad expansion facilitated Argentina's export industry.

Another telling variable is immigration. Argentina's population grew from 2 to 9 million in less than 50 years. Between 1880 and 1900, most immigrants came from southern Italy. Since 1900, most immigrants came from Spain (after Cuba's independence in 1898). Other source countries included Britain, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Russia (Vázquez-Presedo 1971; 1976). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Argentina had one of the largest inflows of immigrants worldwide, surpassing even the United States (Sánchez-Alonso 2019). Immigration waves continued until the 1930 coup. The large number of immigrants who chose Argentina as their destination reflects the favorable environment and prospects for emigrating across the Atlantic, whether for temporary work or as a new home with a promising future for their descendants.

**TABLE 1. Railroad expansion, selected countries
(km per thousand residents)**

	1870	1913	Difference	Pct. growth
United States	29.4	43.5	14.1	48%
Canada	27.3	61.3	34.0	125%
Australia	29.2	65.0	35.8	123%
Argentina	8.6	41.9	33.3	387%
<i>Source:</i> Vázquez-Presedo (1971, 44)				

Conclusions

Thinkers like Belgrano, Moreno, and Rivadavia paved the way to the Generation of 1837 and Alberdi. This second generation of classical liberals tackled the difficult project of adapting their learning from European classical liberals to Argentina's needs at the time. These thinkers not only had the intellectual drive to tailor and advocate for classical liberal ideas, but they also occupied positions of social and political influence. That combination facilitated the classical liberal constitution of 1853, which set the stage for substantial growth, transforming Argentina into one of the richest countries per capita by the first decade of the 1900s. However, the classical liberal institutions were shattered by the 1930 coup. What went wrong in the twentieth century and what happened to the classical liberal thought in Argentina is the topic of a forthcoming Part II to this article.

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About the Authors



Alejandro Gómez is Professor of Economic History at Universidad del CEMA (Buenos Aires) and a Fellow at the Friedman-Hayek Center. He earned his MA in Latin American Studies from the University of Chicago in 1996 and his Ph.D. in History in 2008 from Universidad Torcuato DiTella. He has published articles and books about economic history, business history, and Argentine political history. His email address is agomez@ufm.edu.



Nicolás Cachanosky is Associate Professor of Economics and Director of the Center for Free Enterprise at The University of Texas at El Paso, Senior Fellow at the American Institute of Economic Research, and Fellow of the UCMA Friedman-Hayek Center for the Study of a Free Society. Cachanosky also serves as Associate Editor of the *Southern Economic Journal*. He is past president of the Association of Private Enterprise Education and former director of the Mont Pelerin Society. His email address is ncachanosky@utep.edu.

[Go to archive of Character Issues section](#)
[Go to September 2024 issue](#)