

PAULA ALONSO: *Jardines secretos, legitimaciones públicas. El Partido Autonomista Nacional y la política argentina de fines del siglo XIX*. Buenos Aires: EDHASA, 2010.

This thoroughly researched and carefully argued book is a major contribution to the political history of 19th-century Argentina. In *Jardines secretos...* Paula Alonso studies the workings of the Partido Autonomista Nacional (PAN), the political party that dominated Argentine politics between 1880 and 1916. Although the PAN has attracted significant attention among historians and social scientists, in this book Alonso takes an approach that allows her to open new perspectives on the subject: this is the first study that actually investigates the concrete day-to-day practices that shaped the party and that widely impacted the national political process. This approach demanded so much research that the author was forced to limit her inquiry to the presidencies of General Julio Roca (1880-1886), Miguel Juárez Celman (1886-1890), and, to a lesser extent, Carlos Pellegrini (1890-1892).

While other studies have primarily examined the political outcomes of this period, Alonso is particularly interested in understanding the political processes, that is, the actors' accumulation of small setbacks and triumphs that led to those seemingly obvious results. Thus, against the too encompassing and monolithic previous explanations of the PAN, Alonso's analysis is full of nuances and contrasts, particularly in relation to competition within the party. In effect, the author clearly shows that the party was divided by very conflictive and permanently shifting coalitions (*ligas*) whose leaders competed for the presidential nomination. The author does an excellent job mapping the labyrinthine turns of these *ligas* throughout each one of the then-fourteen Argentine provinces. At the same time, she makes an analytical effort to find explanatory patterns of political behavior without falling into abusive generalizations. Thus, in one case the author groups provinces according to the nature of the intra-party conflict – “control without competition”; “competition with public and violent conflicts”; and “negotiating, negotiating, negotiating” provinces in which the competitors reached private deals. In another case, that of the competition between *modernistas* and *roquistas-mitristas* in 1891-92, she examines their political alignments against their provincial budgets, their exposure to the 1890 economic crisis, and, most important, their intervention into the export economy.

In a similar vein, the author shows the different approaches that Roca and Juárez Celman brought to their leadership and presidential politics. The former used the power of the national executive and his personal clout to influence and, if possible, control provincial politics and the nomination process, preferring, however, that the acquiescence of regional politicians be achieved through

negotiations, realistically avoiding the use of heavy handed (federal interventions) or outright violent means. Marking a significant departure from the style of his predecessor, Juárez Celman operated with a unique mix of personalistic and *laissez-faire* politics: while his administration demanded from provincial leaders public demonstrations of loyalty to the *jefe único del Partido Nacional*, it also largely respected the political autonomy of the provinces (particularly in the context of intra-party competition) and essentially left in their hands policies regarding public infrastructure and credit, which implied a degree of freedom from the interference of the national government that the provinces had not experienced before and would never experience again. Paradoxically, though, Juárez's hands-off approach to provincial politics created the conditions for violent conflicts within the party, which eventually contributed to his demise.

The book contains an ambitious exploration of the partisan press which, the author argues, played a fundamental role in the political system. Against the secrecy of political deals (the *jardines secretos* of politics), newspapers were fundamental in legitimizing the policies of the different administrations before the public opinion. Turning politics into a public affair the partisan press "republicanized" them. Alonso's exploration of the press also shows that there were relevant ideological differences among the contending groups that made up the PAN. In her research-based study of ideology (which avoids foggy invocations of fashionable theories) the author identifies the question of the suppression of suffrage, the role of the press, political corruption, etc., as some of the issues that fueled the political debate among the *ligas*. Particularly interesting are the findings regarding the debates on the workings of Federalism and the role of the political parties. The author claims convincingly that the conversation about the system of government was shaped by the concrete political practices defended by the newspapers. *La Tribuna Nacional* argued that the president's personal influence on the provinces was within the frame of the constitution, while *El Nacional* rejected Roca's leadership as an "intrusive centralism" and advocated for the true political and economic autonomy of the federalized states. Also revealing is her claim that either because they feared factional violence or because they preferred deals between leaders, most groups accorded a rather secondary role to political parties, which helps explain why the institutional development of the PAN was slow and incomplete.

Thoroughly researched and well argued, *Jardines secretos, legitimaciones públicas* is a major contribution to the field that should be made available in English.

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