

The Tribal Imagination: Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz's Reconstruction of the Argentine Tribe That Never Was

NICOLAS SHUMWAY

Introduction

ARGENTINA WOULD SEEM TO OFFER little justification for tribal sentiment. Like most countries, and particularly New World countries, Argentina is in no sense an extended biological family united by common ancestry. The area's first inhabitants were warring native tribes who became "Indians" only after Europeans refused to see them as they saw themselves: as distinct religious and linguistic groups holding little in common with each other. The Spanish conquest and subsequent capitalist expansion brought Europeans and Africans to the Southern Cone who liberally crossed genes and cultures with the natives and with each other, so much so that both natives and immigrants lost much of their ethnic distinctiveness. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Argentine mix master continued its work of amalgamation with newcomers from Europe and from Argentina's interior, the latter being the mixed-blood *cabecitas negras* (little black-heads) who filled Argentina's cities in search of employment. Cultural interpenetration found its political reflection in a nation seemingly in the modernist mold, complete with a liberal constitution, pluralist democracy, and mechanisms for naturalizing and assimilating immigrants. Yet, as we will see below, for some Argentines the liberal nation was not enough, for eventually Argentina would produce its own tribalist mythology which in turn would provide essential ingredients for Argentine nationalism—a nationalism quite at variance with the liberal sense of nationhood.¹

One of the chief architects of this tribalist enterprise was Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz (1898–1959), a populist intellectual, revisionist historian, and defender of Peronism.² Scalabrini is best known outside of Argentina for works I do not examine here: his watershed historical studies on the Argentine economy, *Política británica en el Río de la Plata* and *Historia de los ferrocarriles argentinos*,

both of 1940.³ Largely because of Scalabrini's furious anti-British sentiment, his support of Perón, and his refusal to take sides in World War II, these books were immediately controversial, although they later gained widespread credence among anti-imperialists of every political stripe.⁴ In addition to being a historian, however, Scalabrini was an imaginative student and inventor of the Argentine soul. This aspect of his thought has received little critical attention, despite the fact that *El hombre que está solo y espera*, his major essay on *argentinidad* and the one to which I devote most of my attention here, has remained in print since it first appeared in 1931.⁵

My goal in this article is threefold. In the section immediately following I outline what might be called a paradigm of tribal identity, drawing chiefly from the Biblical story of the House of Israel—the most long-lived and successful tribal story of Western Civilization. After this somewhat disruptive but necessary digression, I compare the Biblical story with Scalabrini's description of Argentina's true identity and show how he seeks to invent a neo-tribal identity for modern Argentina, a myth of "natural" nationhood that, however enduring and imaginative, most certainly has no empirical or rational support. I conclude with a brief look at how Scalabrini's politically successful imaginings might contribute to our understanding of nationalism generally, particularly within the framework created by influential scholars like E. J. Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson.⁶

The Tribal Paradigm: A Lesson from Genesis

Virtually every tribal history begins with a superhuman explanation, be its name God, Spirit, or metaphysics. Not untypical is the Biblical rendition of God's first call to Abram:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen. 12:1–3)

From this short passage we can identify five crucial elements of the tribal paradigm, elements I will refer to, if the reader will forgive a neologism, as "tribalemes." First, the genesis of a tribe is metaphysical, abstract, beyond the senses. In Abram's case, that cause was Yahweh, the tribal deity who would eventually metamorphose into the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This metaphysical principle, however, need not be a deity. As Auguste Comte

pointed out in his condemnation of metaphysics, concepts no less abstract—the social contract or man's inalienable rights for example—often serve the same function. A second tribaleme proclaimed in the above passage is the tribe's link to a particular land, a promised land, that will not only be the space where the tribe enacts its history, but also a supernatural element in the tribe's collective identity, a place of origin, miracles, and dreams of eventual return. Third, the Biblical story links collective identity to a patriarch who in turn gives his posterity lineage and interrelatedness. The tribe is thus a family, and children of the family are born, not made. Moreover, the patriarch becomes patriarchy as his descendants assume tribal leadership. Fourth, the tribe is given a promise that places it above other peoples ("the one who curses you I will curse") making it a covenant people favored by God. And finally, the tribe is given a holy mission ("in you all the families of the earth will be blessed"), a grand, collective destiny.

Later passages in Genesis add names and signs to the tribal paradigm. God changes Abram's name to Abraham, saying, "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5). The new name thus invokes the promise of patriarchy and chosenness. Abraham's descendants also receive a new name when God changes the name of Jacob, Abraham's grandson, to Israel, the root of the tribal name of Israelites and the House of Israel by which all of Jacob's descendants will be known (Genesis 35: 9–10). Accompanying the new name is a sign, that of circumcision, a mark placed on men of the covenant.⁷ Names and signs abound throughout the history of collective identity, be they families, tribes, or modern nations. For example, in our times, through conversion or naturalization, citizens in modern nations take on new names to show new allegiances. In a similar fashion, the physical sign of identity marked by circumcision is not unlike national symbols of flags, seals, and uniforms. All mark a special relationship by which the individual surrenders identity to the collective.

Another factor in the tribal paradigm as it emerges from the Genesis story is the need to exclude, to identify enemies and lesser mortals. Sarai, being barren, urged her husband to have a child with the slave woman Hagar. But once the child, Ishmael, was born, Sarai became jealous of Hagar with a fury that exploded several years later on seeing Ishmael playing with Sarai's newborn child, Isaac. "So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac'" (Genesis 10–11). No family, tribe, or nation has ever functioned

without restricting membership and its privileges—which is another way of defining outsiders and enemies. However harsh Sarai's action, she established the need of a collectivity to include as well as exclude. Isaac and his posterity would be the children of the covenant, the bearers of the sign, and the recipients of the promise. Their specialness has meaning only if others are excluded.

The capstone of the tribal paradigm is the right to demand sacrifice, by the voice of God, the voice of kings who rule through divine right, or the collective voice of an idealized people whose elected leaders speak for them. Abraham and Sarah have only one son, Isaac, the one destined by God to carry the birthright to all Abraham's posterity. As their only son, he is the special bearer of promise and privilege and an essential link in tribal continuity. Yet, God chooses to test Abraham's devotion to the covenant by commanding him to offer Isaac as a burnt sacrifice. Abraham dutifully builds the altar, binds the boy on top of a wood pyre, and stretches forth his knife to kill him. At the last moment, an angel stops Abraham, but only after a crucial point has been made: the individual who is allied to the collective must be prepared to give back to the collective even if the collective requires his life.

The Genesis story then offers a concise list of "tribalemes." These would include the supernatural cause, the sacred land, the founding of a family and a patriarchy, the favored status of the collective over other peoples, the holy mission or collective destiny of the collective, the special names and signs of group identity, the capacity to identify and exclude enemies, and the right to demand sacrifice.⁸

The Neo-Tribalism of Argentina's Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz

Little in Scalabrini's early years indicated that he would eventually author a book like *El hombre que está solo y espera*, much less become a searing critic of British imperialism and a major nationalist thinker. Although trained as a surveyor and engineer, young Raúl showed literary talent of a belletrist sort (as well as prowess as a boxer). Barely twenty-five years old, he published in 1923, *La manga*, a collection of short stories that occupies a minor place in Argentina's literary canon. By the late 1920s he was regularly contributing cultural commentary to Buenos Aires's leading magazines and newspapers, including the patrician daily *La Nación*.

Politics and economics, however, drew Scalabrini away from imaginative literature. On September 6, 1930, Argentina, facing a plunging export market

brought on by the world economic depression, experienced an event that would prove decisive in the country's history and also change the course of Scalabrini's life: General José Félix Uriburu led armed troops against the second presidency of Hipólito Yrigoyen in the country's first coup of this century. The coup ended nearly eighty years of institutional government and revealed the fragility of Argentina's democratic institutions. A fascist sympathizer and devout Catholic, Uriburu proved too naive and inflexible to be president, and after less than a year in power, he was replaced by General Augusto P. Justo, a wily and ebullient politician with grand ideas and few scruples. Justo's versatility in fraud and general disregard for democratic procedure led many Argentines to refer to the 1930s as *la década infame*, the infamous decade. The coincidence of economic decline and political failure also inspired (and disillusioned) a remarkable generation of writers, intellectuals, and historians who came of age in the 1930s, Scalabrini among them.⁹ A year after the coup, he published *El hombre que está solo y espera*.

Scalabrini begins *El hombre que está solo y espera* with two striking images whose force extends beyond history to myths of creation and first causes highly reminiscent of the tribal paradigm outlined earlier. In the prologue, Scalabrini argues that Argentina, or better said, the authentic Argentina, must be made in the image of the "spirit of the land [which is] like a giant man [who] because of his measureless size is as invisible to us as we are to microbes. [That giant] is an enormous archetype that fed on and grew from the immigrant influx, devouring and assimilating millions of Spaniards without ever ceasing to be identical to itself. Destiny shrinks before [the spirit's] grandeur."¹⁰

The spirit of the land implicitly denies nation-making as a rational enterprise, or a consensual activity involving Renan's daily plebiscite. Rather, it suggests a nostalgia for a supernatural cause not unlike the God of the Hebrew Bible. Scalabrini seeks an explanation beyond history and science. In his scheme of things, Argentina's true foundation is a spirit, a supernatural cause, an echo of the Biblical phrase, "Now the Lord said to Abram" (Genesis 12:1).

By linking that spirit to the land, Scalabrini invokes a second powerful image, the land itself—and to some degree conflates metaphysics with place, God with land. Yahweh's promise to Abram begins with the promise of a new land: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you . . ." (Genesis 12:1). In Scalabrini's imagery, Argentina's destiny is also linked to a land that would give the country its special character as well as determine its destiny. The land becomes a primary and metaphysical cause that precedes and supersedes the political nation. Like Abraham's God, the spirit of

the land does not heed the wishes of individuals, but appoints them to its own purposes.¹¹

For Scalabrini, however, not all Argentines are equally sensitive to the Spirit of the Land. Just as God set Israelites apart from others, the spirit of the land must also claim its own. Similarly, just as the story of Sarah and Hagar showed that chosenness must include the right to exclude, Scalabrini must divide his world into authentic Argentines and their enemies.

The authentic Argentine, the one moved by the spirit of the land, needs a name, an outward sign of his true identity. Scalabrini gives him several names, "The Man Who Is Alone and Waiting" or more commonly, *El hombre de Corrientes y Esmeralda*, The Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda Streets. The corner of Corrientes and Esmeralda is a fairly insignificant point in downtown Buenos Aires, the intersection of a busy thoroughfare and relatively short side street. That this point does not reflect grandeur is precisely Scalabrini's intention. The man of such a corner would be a typical Argentine, *a porteño*, a product of the real Buenos Aires. What distinguishes this individual, however, is his sensitivity to the motions of the spirit of the land. Scalabrini's terminology here blends notions of typical Argentine with a somewhat contradictory notion of the typical *porteño*. The true *porteño* thus has more in common with the provincial Argentine than with the foreignized and foreignizing enemy; both are defined by their submission to the spirit of the land. Or said differently, Scalabrini distinguishes true Argentines from their enemies—not *porteños* from provincials. This identity, however, does not come without cost:

The *porteño* man [he could just as easily say The Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda] is held back, as time itself is held back, by the sensation of his powerlessness before the purposes of the spirit of the land, to which his destiny is emotionally and unchangingly wed. To free himself of that responsibility, of which he is both author and agent, the man amputates a fraction of himself, and cedes to the collectivity some of the rights and duties conferred on him. (64)

Scalabrini's true Argentine thus surrenders his individuality to the group, to the tribe. This surrender of self may be painful, a kind of amputation as Scalabrini puts it, yet one necessary for the spirit to realize its destiny as well as the individual to realize his. Liberal individualism must yield to the collective or tribal man who in his collectivity responds only to the mysterious impulses of the spirit of the land.

As in other cases, Scalabrini's imagery of the spirit that overrides the will of the individual bears comparison with the tribal identity given to the House of Israel. The God of Israel was a jealous god, a god who commanded his people to

disavow all other gods and render homage only to Yahweh. As Karen Armstrong shows in her remarkable book *A History of God*, the early peoples of Palestine were a polytheistic society for whom Yahweh was merely one god among many, a god who first proved his efficacy as the Lord of Sabaoth, or god of the armies. Other gods and goddesses—Baal, Murduk, and Ishtar for example—lived alongside Yahweh in the popular imagination. To some degree, individuals could manipulate their world by invoking the help of different gods for different purposes. Like Scalabrini's spirit of the land, however, Yahweh had his own goals, the first of which was his demand for exclusive allegiance, an allegiance that in turn superseded individual will and allowed for the collective obedience that would provide the foundation for tribal associations. Interestingly, the early Hebrew writers do not appear to see the other gods as unreal; rather, Yahweh's demand for allegiance is portrayed as a struggle between real gods, with Yahweh being the one who would eliminate the others.¹²

Scalabrini's notion that the individual Argentine must submit to the spirit of the land and even amputate a part of himself to join the collectivity invokes nearly identical imagery. In a word, the true Argentine must sacrifice something, however dear, to show his submission to the spirit of the land and his desire to be one with the collectivity. The capstone of the tribal paradigm is the right to demand sacrifice, by the voice of God, the voice of kings who rule through divine right, or the collective voice of an idealized people whose elected leaders speak for them. In the myth of Israel, Abraham and Sarah have only one son, Isaac, the one destined by God to carry the birthright to all Abraham's posterity. Yet, Abraham's willingness to kill his son to preserve the covenant makes an essential point: the individual who is allied to the collective must be prepared to give back to the collective even if it means the life of his only heir. Scalabrini's image of the need to amputate part of oneself is no less striking.¹³

Failure to abandon foreign gods and submit only to Yahweh also brought hardship. Indeed, Israel's travails are repeatedly attributed to the people's refusal to forsake foreign gods and worship only Yahweh. Scalabrini also condemns those Argentines who do not hear and obey the spirit of the land. Moreover, his unrighteous, like those of ancient Israel, showed their sinfulness by submitting to foreign gods. Argentina's repeated crises, and particularly the crisis of 1930, was in Scalabrini's description brought on by the failure of Argentine liberals to submit to the spirit of the land:

[The liberals] had ideals, outlines of ideals that seemed within easy reach. They naively believed in science. The biologists, the physiologists, the chemists, the astronomers and the mechanics were all lay priests of [the liberal] religion. . . . In few years, they

perverted the dynamic of the country. They allied themselves to foreign capital, and together they founded towns, laid railroads, constructed ports, dragged canals and dikes, imported machinery, distributed the land and colonized it. In such tasks, they diligently occupied themselves, and they failed to attend to the spirit of the country. (Scalabrini Ortiz, 55)

Failure in such tasks was inevitable because they were not authentic, and the Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda "is immune to everything not born in himself" (40). The projects of liberalism could not succeed because the real Argentine mistrusts "all the conventional lies of European culture" (92). The mystical encounter they sought had to spring from their own land and could not be imported. As with the children of Israel, their salvation lay in abandoning foreign gods and obeying the spirit of the land, the true god of the Argentine expanse. Underlying Scalabrini's indictment of Argentine liberals is a sense that Argentina's true and grand destiny had been frustrated, that the Argentine equivalent of "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" had not been realized because the children of the promise had worshipped other gods.

It is not enough, however, to reject the lay priests of foreign doctrines—the biologists, chemists, and technicians listed above; the true Argentine must also accept a new epistemology by which knowledge is conferred and reject the empirical and rational processes that justified foreign dogmas. To define this new epistemology, Scalabrini tells us that the porteño doesn't think and in the final analysis he doesn't need to think. Rather, he must intuit; he must trust in his feelings (*pálpitos*). Scalabrini maintains that "the porteño doesn't think; he feels. I feel, therefore I am, is a more appropriate aphorism than the Cartesian one." Later he affirms that "the porteño does not plan. Rather than rely on planning, he waits for sudden intuitions" (75). And in those intuitions the true Argentine hears the voice of the land. Moreover, anyone who fails to hear the land, betrays his destiny as an Argentine. For Scalabrini, improvisation rather than rational planning is the method of choice, for improvisation will not betray intuition the way planning does. Or as he puts it:

The Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda does not challenge, nor does he aspire to challenge, the European's defense of European culture. The Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda intuitively understands that compared to a European Argentina's most cultured men . . . are but vulgar apprentices. . . . On such men, the real Argentine confers an honorarium of deep disdain as those intellectuals improvise shallow arguments against improvisation. And that is one of the reasons behind the unbreachable divorce that separates the intellectual realm from that of the porteño. (77–78)

For Scalabrini, feeling, rather than knowing, is the way the spirit of the land communicates to its acolytes. One's encounter with Argentina's authentic destiny is possible only when the voice of reason is superseded. The Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda "intuits (*palpita*) judiciously, that in no book will he find help for his uncertainties" (77).

Who will lead in such a system? Scalabrini argues that a true Argentine leader must first and foremost hear the spirit of the land and in that hearing also discern the inchoate will of authentic Argentines:

To decipher [the Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda] one must be identical to him. Discerning his will is the despair of politicians, functionaries, heads of newspapers, and all others who in some way depend on him. Men who are merely intelligent fail in public affairs. The Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda, above all else, demands that public figures have not only book knowledge, but also powerful instincts and ready intuition; that is, they must be men of feeling (*pálpito*). For this reason, [the Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda] is little interested in programs, platforms, and the verbiage of political parties. When faced with the complex reality of Argentina, programs are false posturings compared to the reality of men and right conduct. Intuition (*pálpito*) is the only effective pilot in the chaos of porteño life, and the only virtue the possession of which the porteño will respect. (79–80)

In other words, the entire civic apparatus, its institutions, laws, procedures and methods, mean little to Scalabrini Ortiz. The only possible government is that of a person who understands the inarticulate, and perhaps inarticulable, voice of the authentic people. In short, what is needed is a single leader on whom the spirit of the land has conferred its mystical priesthood, the universal priesthood of the voiceless believers. That leader is the incarnation of Scalabrini's nostalgia for Yahweh's prophet, for the patriarch Abraham, for the Moses who heard God in the burning bush. Intuition in Scalabrini's epistemology, replaces the authoritative "Now the Lord said," and it constitutes the new ground by which prophets are chosen: he who intuits best should lead the rest. Consequently, Scalabrini does not stop at denouncing subservience to European models; he also argues that Argentine history, if properly read with an ear to the spirit of the land, offers lessons on how Argentina should govern itself. The Man of Corrientes and Esmeralda in Scalabrini's view needs a strong leader; moreover, Scalabrini finds such leadership in the example of the nineteenth-century federalists who, unversed in foreign ways, heard the spirit of the land and thus knew the will of the authentic people.

The name populist Argentina conferred on that man who intuits and articulates the authentic people's will, is the medieval term "caudillo." Along

with other revisionist historians, Scalabrini helped popularize the notion that only a caudillo could govern Argentina and that in this century the name of the caudillo had been manifest in two persons: Hipólito Yrigoyen and Juan Domingo Perón.¹⁴ In one of his most telling lectures, titled "Yrigoyen y Perón," Scalabrini argues that what might have saved Yrigoyen were the "invisible links of communication and understanding" between the people and their "conductor." He writes:

The Oligarchy launched against [Yrigoyen] their entire store of political artillery. It surrounded him with a flexible but unbreakable belt of espionage and calumny. The newspapers attacked him with their steeliest satirical darts, they called him names, and besmirched him with vulgar accusations. But the intuition of the people followed him with its accurate instinct, and Yrigoyen's popularity grew to the same degree that his enemies tried to discredit him, as though between the people and their potential conductor there had grown invisible links of communication and understanding. (*Yrigoyen y Perón*, 16-17)

In the same lecture, Scalabrini goes on to say that Yrigoyen did not fully understand that he was the people's choice, that his will was what truly represented the people and the spirit of the land, that he was their caudillo. As Scalabrini puts it:

Yrigoyen committed two political errors. The first was that of stopping his revolutionary work at Parliament's doorsill and allowing a senate that came from the worst sector of Oligarchic rule to impede the work of his government in its quest for national re-vindication. The second was leaving intact the Oligarchy's power base of land, newspapers, and privilege. . . . These political errors engendered [the coup] of September 6, 1930. (*Yrigoyen y Perón*, 22-23)

In sum, according to Scalabrini, Yrigoyen's error was in believing that he could reform Argentina through the mechanisms of political and economic liberalism. While Scalabrini does not spell out what he had in mind, it would seem that Yrigoyen, in Scalabrini's view, should have abolished congress and confiscated the property and newspapers of his wealthy enemies. Or said differently, Scalabrini thought that Yrigoyen should have behaved more like a God-chosen patriarch whose righteousness in defense of the people did not need institutional consensus. The Argentine tribe needed its Moses, someone who would defend the authentic people and liberate the promised land from the wicked and the powerful, someone whose authority came from the land itself rather than the niceties of bourgeois democracy.¹⁵

Since the caudillo exists only as he intuits the spirit of the land which in turn coheres with the unspoken intuition and will of the people, Scalabrini

at some point has to define his authentic people, those who are not anti-Argentines and *extranjerizantes* devoted to foreign models and cultures. In this endeavor he again reflects a central concern of tribalism as well as a problem concretely addressed in the Hebrew Bible. What distinguishes the People of God is their covenant with God, which in turn gives the people specific rights and responsibilities.

Like the anonymous compilers of Hebrew scripture, Scalabrini also argues for the existence of a covenant people—a people in covenant with the spirit of the land. In his scheme of things, Argentina's authentic people had their first incarnation with the Revolución de Mayo of 1810, when the "Argentine multitudes armed by a powerful instinct of political and historical orientation" first deposited their faith "in the conductor who guided them," in this case Mariano Moreno whose Jacobean "Plan revolucionario" Scalabrini approvingly quotes at considerable length (*Yrigoyen y Perón*, 29-20; 110-11). The covenant people appeared again at several key points in Argentine history, often in support of particular caudillos among whom Scalabrini places Mariano Moreno, Manuel Dorrego, Juan Manuel de Rosas, and several federalist caudillos. In Scalabrini's reconstruction of Argentine history, the liberal constitution of 1853 was an act of popular betrayal, a surrender to foreign gods, and its primary inspiration, the nineteenth-century thinker Juan Bautista Alberdi, represents for Scalabrini "a terrible indicator of the degree of submission to which a distinguished intellect can lower itself when it does not feed on unbending adhesion to the feelings of the people of his native land" (*Yrigoyen y Perón*, 113).¹⁶

For Scalabrini, however, the "foreignizing" impulses of Argentine liberalism came to naught because the immigrants drawn to Argentine shores between 1860 and 1930 may have been foreigners, but they were more attuned to the spirit of their new land than their adopted country's "foreignized" liberals. As Scalabrini puts it:

The intruders formed hordes of the worst quality, of the vilest substance, were refugees from races that ran over themselves in their unchecked ambition, mobs spurred by the illusion of fortune, who carried, in exaggerated form, all the defects of their society, and none of its virtues. They were beings of wretched interests, tenacious because of their unsatisfied appetites. Sensual and tempestuous beings who liked noise, music, dance and revelry. (*El hombre que está solo*, 45)

With perverse delight Scalabrini in the foregoing quotation repeats all the prejudices of Argentina's elite who, while needing the cheap labor of migrants and immigrants, saw them as intruders who would weaken and besmirch the Europeanized, cultured Argentina that was their dream.¹⁷ Scalabrini soon

drops his ironic pose and concludes that the despised newcomers became the repository of the spirit of the land and thereby the true covenant people and the salvation of the country. With their arrival, "Buenos Aires survived the danger of remaining segregated from the countryside, of forming a government without relationship to the pampas that nurtured her and of which she was symbol, depository and fervent idea (*pensamiento adicto*)" (45). Argentina had been in danger of Europeanization. But with the arrival of the migrants and immigrants, the spirit of the land imposed its will, and the Man of Esmeralda and Corrientes again reflected the characteristics of the pampa: "He is lazy, taciturn, long-suffering and haughty. Buenos Aires is again the capital of the pampa" (51). While Scalabrini did not advocate laziness or arrogance, at this juncture he sees in those qualities an admirable resistance to the liberal "anti-Argentine" project.

Scalabrini's most emotional epiphany of the true Argentine people came to him on October 17, 1945, when a multitude sometimes estimated at one million invaded Buenos Aires's Plaza de Mayo in support of Juan Domingo Perón who had been arrested and detained by political enemies on the island of Martín García, a small island in the River Plate estuary. Of that multitude Scalabrini writes:

The fieldworker from Cafuelas, the riveter, the steelworker, the automobile mechanic, the weaver, the peon—all marched together, united in the same voice and the same faith. They were the bedrock of the aroused patria. They were the foundation of the nation that was emerging, just as bedrock rose in prehistoric times in the commotion of an earthquake. They were the substratum of our idiosyncrasies and our collective possibilities, all of them present without fears or pretense. They were the no-ones and the have-nothings, manifest in a near infinite multiplicity of human varieties and colors, glued together by the same emotion and impulse, sustained by a common truth that only one word could translate: Perón. What I had dreamed of and intuited for many years was present there, embodied, intense, multifaceted, yet all in one spirit. They were the men who were alone and waiting for their moment of re-vindication. The spirit of the land was present as I had never believed I would see it. . . . [T]he spirit of the land stood proud and vibrant over the plaza of our liberties, filled with the confirmation of the spirit's existence. (*Yrigoyen y Perón*, 27–28)

He later concludes that "those multitudes who saved Perón from captivity and who in one day paralyzed the country in his name, were the same multitudes who had congregated in grief at the burial of Hipólito Yrigoyen. . . . They were the same multitudes armed with a powerful instinct of political and historical orientation who since 1810 had entrusted their noble ideals to the leader who

guided them" (*Yrigoyen y Perón*, 29–30).¹⁸ Thus, Scalabrini constructs his tribe, his covenant people: the spirit of the land, the people who intuit its purposes, and the caudillo who articulates those purposes and makes them reality. Moreover, it is the covenant people set apart from the enemies of the spirit, the foreignizing liberals, the cepoy bourgeoisie that has sold its birthright as true Argentines and worships alien gods.

Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz and the Tribal Imagination

At this juncture, it should be clear that the tribal paradigm outlined above, using the Genesis story as a point of departure, does indeed delimit a series of "tribalemes" applicable to much of Scalabrini's construction of Argentine identity, history, and destiny. I would also point out that, although I chose the Genesis story for its familiarity, the "tribalemes" found therein are not unlike those found in founding myths of most human collectives, however "primitive" a particular collective might seem. Moreover that same paradigm can serve to describe many manifestations of modern nationalism, beginning with Johann Herder's sense of the German *Volksgeist* and ending with . . . well, unfortunately, it hasn't ended at all. Tribalism of the most virulent sort underlies much of the nationalism dismembering what used to be Yugoslavia and the Soviet block, not to mention the ravages wrought by Hutus versus Tutsis in Rwanda. And in Argentina, one can hear echoes of Scalabrini's tribalism in the right-wing ravings of recent commentators like the frustrated coup-maker, Colonel Aldo Rico.¹⁹ These facts raise several interesting questions. How, for example, are we to understand the success of Scalabrini's doctrine? But even more important, what are we to make of Scalabrini as a representative maker of tribalemes, particularly in comparison to the vision of nationalism popularized by Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, and friends? I conclude with some premature musings on these issues.

First, there can be little doubt concerning the fact that Scalabrini's spiritual Argentina was a major ingredient of the Peronist myth. Under Perón, the balcony of the Casa Rosada became Argentina's most powerful lectern. From it, Perón's *descamisados* learned that they were the true Argentines, heirs to a grand destiny that had been frustrated by upper-class traitors, liberals, sellers of the Fatherland (*los vendepatria*), and cepoy agents of British imperialists. Said differently, Perón inculcated in the masses that they were the true covenant people, the men who were alone and waiting, and that their time had come. No one can fully explain the popular success of Peronism; part of it might be historical accident,

and no doubt much of it has to do with Perón's extraordinary charisma and political genius. But to this equation I would add another factor: that by using Scalabrini's neo-tribalism as an emotional base, Peronism gave the Argentine masses what liberalism had denied them, namely a sense of place in history and collective identity, complete with a supernatural origin and destiny, a rationale for seeing the upper classes as anti-Argentine enemies, and a justification for patriarchy. In sum, Perón, using Scalabrini's thinking as a point of reference, established a sense of tribe. Indeed, without Scalabrini's tribal imagination, Peronism would have lacked one of its chief ingredients.

Scalabrini's success, however, poses a larger question about neo-tribalism in general and its importance in nationalist mythology. And this brings me to E. J. Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson, the two thinkers who have in recent years most influenced our understanding of nationalism. Hobsbawm and Anderson are careful scholars who, while identifying ideas essential to nationalist mythologies (what I call *tribalemes*), seem particularly intent on showing that such ideas have no empirical ground, that such ideas are in fact "imagined." No serious student of nationalism would dispute this point; to do so would eventually lead one to argue that God, or some construction thereof, created nations—which of course is absurd. Nor would I dispute the contention that liberalism has indeed created successful nations in which the tribalist yearnings of nationalism are held at bay.

Where Hobsbawm and Anderson go wrong is in their insistence that nations (and by extension *tribalemes*) are a recent phenomenon, that prior to the modern period nations did not exist because the mechanisms for imagining them did not exist. Anderson, for example, argues at some length that print capitalism allowed nations to emerge, that without the sense of broad-scale collectivity and parallel time, modern nations would not have appeared.²⁰ What we find in this argument is an extended confusion of vehicle with substance, scale with essence. While it is most certainly true that print capitalism allowed for larger collectivities, it is not at all clear that print capitalism did much to change the essential ingredients of collective spirit and peoplehood. Print capitalism may have allowed tribalism to occur on a broader scale, but it did not change its basic structure. In short, however easily debunked tribal constructs may be in any objective sense, they repeatedly occur in the history of human communities, be that collectivity the desert tribe of early Israel or a modern nation like Argentina. I would further suggest that tribalism (and that brand of nationalism that seeks a tribal identification) is the exact opposite and chief nemesis of the liberal state. Just as Scalabrini's notions of real versus traitorous Argentines exacerbated

divisions already apparent in the country, tribalism will always threaten societies dedicated to pluralism and consensus.

Such are the lessons of Scalabrini's tribal imagination. Based on palpable evidence, his tribal construct for Argentina has no defense. Yet, when we compare his construct to tribal constructs much older than Argentina, we find remarkable parallels. Moreover, however flimsy the evidence for his imaginings, his tribalism formed the mythological base for the most powerful nationalist movement in Argentine history—and one that could again become a powerful political force when and if the current experiments with neo-liberalism come to naught. I would suggest that part of Scalabrini's success lies in his ability to recast ancient human sentiments in a modern framework. I would further argue that such tribal sentiments often contribute to nationalist movements, a fact that might suggest a kind of collective imagination by which human collectives identify themselves for reasons that may have more to do with anthropology and psychology than economics and politics. In sum, we can admire Scalabrini's imaginative genius in forging a tribalism for such an unlikely area as the hodgepodge of culture, history, and ethnicity known as Argentina; but we can also speculate that, if he hadn't done it, someone else would have.

The University of Texas at Austin

¹ As is often pointed out, the term, "nation" is not particularly useful for delimiting any particular sort of community. Applied to countries as old as China and as new as Zimbabwe, as large as the United States and as small as Kuwait—as well as to peoples as scattered as Diaspora Jews and as stateless as Kurds—the term seems to include so many different types of social groups as to be virtually useless in any definitive sense. As early as 1882, French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan in *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation* argued convincingly that Romantic notions of nationhood based on supposed racial or cultural homogeneity had no factual basis. Rather, he saw them as human constructions, the result of a "daily plébiscite" (*Oeuvres Complètes* Paris, 1947–61, vol. I, pp. 887–907). Modern historians like E. J. Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson insist that nations as we know them did not exist until the beginning of the modern period, i.e., the mid-eighteenth century. They support this position by arguing that the erosion of ecclesiastical power, the decline of the nobility, and the rise of the bourgeoisie demanded a new sort of collective identity that became the modern nation. Anderson also argues that the rise of print capitalism allowed ever larger communities to become linguistically and ideologically cohesive, to imagine themselves on a larger scale and in parallel time, thereby becoming "nations." (See E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. 2nd ed. [Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992], pp. 8–45; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread*

of *Nationalism*. Revised edition. [London: Verso, 1991], pp. 5–7.) These arguments do indeed offer considerable insight into how Hobsbawm and Anderson use the term, but ultimately their argument is tautological—i.e., nations are what they call nations—and to some degree sidesteps the fact that the term was in use long before the 1700s, and is still applied to human collectives that do not meet Anderson and Hobsbawm's stringent requirements. While appreciating their attempts to define the word, or at least tell us how they use it, in this article I define "tribalism" in fairly specific ways, but avoid using the term "nation" in any particular fashion. Further, while I argue that tribalism (as I define it here) often contributes to nationalist movements, I recognize that the term "nationalism" is not necessarily limited to the tribal paradigm used here.

² Without question the most complete study of Scalabrini's life and works is Norberto Galasso's highly sympathetic biography, *Vida de Scalabrini Ortiz* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Mar Dulce, 1970). Also useful is Galasso's less detailed biography *Scalabrini Ortiz* (Buenos Aires: Cuadernos de Crisis, 1975).

³ Both books consider the effect of British loans, ownership, and general influence on Argentine economic development—an effect that in Scalabrini's view impoverished Argentina and left it in a state of neo-colonial dependence. Scalabrini's economic ideas are well described and analyzed in Mark Falcoff, "Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz: The Making of an Argentine Nationalist," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 52, no. 1 (February 1972), 74–101. See also Mark Falcoff, "Argentine Nationalism on the Eve of Perón: Force of Radical Orientation of Young Argentina and Its Rivals," Ph.D. diss. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University, 1970.

⁴ Another reason for Scalabrini's importance was his influence on Argentina's most important political figure of this century, Juan Domingo Perón, the teacher of masses, "*un Don Juan para machos*." (The phrase "*un Don Juan para machos*" comes from Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier's description of Guadeloupe's nineteenth-century dictator Victor Hugues, and in my view aptly describes Perón's ability to charm men who should have known better. (See Alejo Carpentier, *El siglo de las luces*, 1962; Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1992, p. 107.) Perón invented little and borrowed much. Indeed, a chief element of his political genius was his ability to bring diverse, often contradictory, forces and ideas into the same political movement. His understanding of Argentine history, particularly its economic history, was much influenced by the *Cuadernos de FORJA*, whose chief author was Scalabrini Ortiz (See Galasso, *Vida de Scalabrini*, pp. 373–378). Similarly, the historical analysis in Perón's most influential book, *Los vendepatria; pruebas de una traición*, first published in Venezuela in 1957 can be traced directly to Scalabrini—a debt Perón actually acknowledges at several points in the text (*Los vendepatria*, passim). Yet, Scalabrini had little contact with Perón and resented not receiving more attention, or for that matter a government post, during Perón's first two presidencies (1946–1955) (see Norberto Galasso, *Scalabrini Ortiz*, pp. 64–65). Nonetheless, when Perón fell in 1955, Scalabrini returned to the political fray, arguing until his death in 1959 that Peronism was the only alternative to colonial domination.

⁵ Although *El hombre que está solo y espera* may be Scalabrini's most popular work, and one he repeatedly refers to in his later years, it is a book given short shrift by his

biographers. Mark Falcoff, a usually perceptive analyst of Argentine affairs, makes the remarkable claim that the book is rich in *lunfardo*, Buenos Aires's lower-class dialect, and basically dismisses it as "disjointed and prolix" albeit, "amusing." I suppose that "amusing" is a matter of taste; it is less clear how anyone could confuse Scalabrini's elegant, often baroque, prose with *lunfardo* (see Mark Falcoff, "Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz: The Making of an Argentine Nationalist," p. 89). Norberto Galasso sees the book primarily as a poetic endeavor that laid the ideological ground for Scalabrini's historical revisionism and anti-imperialist militancy, but what he says on the book is more descriptive than analytical (see *Vida de Scalabrini*, pp. 122–133).

⁶ The extent to which the tribalist paradigm outlined below can be applied to thinking beyond Scalabrini's lies beyond the scope of this article. I do not, for example, trace elements of Scalabrini's thought to the proto-nationalism of thinkers like Johann Herder or Charles Maurras, although such connections could be made. In a longer study soon to be completed, however, I examine other nationalist movements in Spanish America as they show a nostalgia for tribal identity similar to Scalabrini's. Several good studies are available on Argentine nationalism. Among the best are Marysa Gerassi Navarro, *Los nacionalistas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Alvarez, 1968) and David Rock's *Authoritarian Argentina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁷ Name changes in the Bible often indicate new relationships. Sarai becomes Sarah to symbolize that she ceases her ordinary existence and is called to "give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Genesis 17:15–16). In the Christian testament, Simon becomes Peter, a name that marks his transition from mere disciple to "the rock" on which Christ will build his church (16:17–18). Similarly, after his conversion, Saul, the persecutor of Christians, becomes Paul, the Christian evangelist and apostle to the Gentiles.

⁸ In a forthcoming book, also bearing in its title the term *tribal imagination*, I include information on how the tribalemes identified in this section occur in other cultures. While the Genesis story provides a useful frame for this article, tribalemes of this sort can be found throughout human cultures and certainly not just in Genesis.

⁹ Other important meditations on Argentina's apparent failure include works by nationalists Julió and Rodolfo Irazusta (*La argentina y el imperialismo británico* of 1934), Benjamín Villafañe (*La tragedia argentina* of 1934), and José Luis Torres (*Algunas maneras de vender la patria* of 1940). A particularly pessimistic work is Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's *Radiografía de la pampa* (1933) in which he argues that Argentina's failure was organic and thereby inescapable, the result of defects in Creole character, Argentine geography, and Hispanic tradition. In *Historia de una pasión argentina* (1937), Eduardo Mallea laments that national purpose has given way to materialism; he further outlines an unfocused defense of Criollismo, not entirely unlike Scalabrini's in *El hombre que está solo*, although the two men were far from political allies. Also important is Carlos Ibarguren whose sympathetic biography of nineteenth-century strongman, Juan Manuel de Rosas, published in 1930, inaugurated a school of historical revisionism of which Scalabrini would form part. For a brief overview of intellectual currents of the time, see Mark Falcoff, "Intellectual Currents" in *Prologue to Perón* (Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1975), pp. 110–135. A useful, though highly tendentious intellectual history of Scalabrini's times is Juan José Hernández Arregui's *La formación de la conciencia nacional*, first published in 1960 and available in several editions. See also Joseph R. Barger's study on Argentine historiography, "The Historiography of the Río de la Plata Area Since 1830." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 39 (November 1959): 388–642.

¹⁰ Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz, *El hombre que está solo y espera* (1931; Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1976), 19. Future references to this book are included in the text.

¹¹ The connection between scripture and *El hombre que está solo* was not lost on its first critics, some of whom called it the *Biblia porteña*. See Galasso, *Vida de Scalabrini*, pp. 122–128. It is also noteworthy that Scalabrini subtitled his book, *Tierra de nadie, tierra de profetas* as a devotionalary for Argentines. Although too abstract for easy description, the poems in *Tierra de nadie* frequently make reference to the mystical Argentine land and the need of individuals to submerge themselves in a collective identity, in "melting oneself into something larger than oneself" (16).

¹² Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 7–27.

¹³ The need for the individual to suppress his ego to bond with the collectivity is also a frequent theme in Scalabrini's book of poetry, *Tierra sin nada, Tierra de profetas: devocionario para el hombre argentino*. 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1973), passim.

¹⁴ Yrigoyen became president of Argentina in 1916 after some twenty-five years of struggle against what he called "the regime," his name for the oligarchic, ostensibly liberal governments that had ruled Argentina since Bartolomé Mitre became president in 1862, one of Yrigoyen's major achievements was seeing the passage of the Sáenz Peña Law which in 1912 brought universal suffrage to Argentina (men only) and thus paved the way for Yrigoyen's presidential triumph four years later. Despite vicious opposition from Argentine traditionalists, Yrigoyen served a full term. Forbidden by the constitution to seek reelection, he yielded power to Marcelo T. de Alvear in 1922, but returned again to the presidency in 1928. On September 6, 1930, he was ousted from power by a fascist-led military coup, the first in this century. Carlos Renem recently became the first Argentine president since 1928 to complete a full six-year term.

¹⁵ In November of 1939, Scalabrini founded a daily newspaper titled *Reconquista* or "reconquest." The name is a powerful allusion to the wars fought by Spanish Christians during the late Middle Ages to liberate Christian Spain (which the *reconquistadores* thought included the entire Iberian Peninsula) from Moorish (i.e., foreign) domination. Since the Spanish *reconquista* was essentially a holy war against a foreign occupation, the connection between the Spanish *reconquista* and Scalabrini's struggle to reclaim Argentina for true Argentines was surely not lost on him. The name thus makes a strong emotional connection between the struggles of two covenant peoples to reclaim their promised land from foreign occupation. Oddly, Falcoff claims that the newspaper's name

alludes to Buenos Aires's victory over a British invasion force in 1806. While the creole militia that defeated the British may have seen themselves as part of a *reconquista*, the true mythological resonance of the term goes back to the struggle of Spanish Christians against the Moors.

¹⁶ Scalabrini's fascination with strong leaders and his disillusionment with bourgeois democracy led to frequent accusations of fascism. Scalabrini himself claimed that he was a "Leninist" and a materialist (Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina*, 123), although it is not clear what precision or scope he might have given these terms. His connection with fascism and pro-Axis sympathizers is a much debated topic. While there is little evidence that he actively supported the Axis war effort, he did collaborate with Axis supporters in their campaign against British interests in Argentina (see David Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina*, pp. 23–24 and 198, and Mark Falcoff, "Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz . . ." pp. 95–97). His most sympathetic biographer, Norberto Galasso, claims that although tempted by an offer of money from the German embassy to help subsidize Scalabrini's short-lived periodical, *Reconquista*, Scalabrini refused the offer and thus accepted bankruptcy (Galasso, *Vida de Scalabrini*, pp. 301–312).

¹⁷ The anti-immigrant sentiment is easy to document. In her ground-breaking study of Spanish American autobiography, Sylvia Molloy shows how Miguel Cané's seemingly innocent memoirs, *Juvenilia* of 1882, is in fact an exercise in "class bonding" to shore up defenses against the immigrant intruders. See also Germán García's *El inmigrante en la novela argentina* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1970).

¹⁸ Scalabrini retells the same incident using virtually the same words in the foreword to his book of poetry and poem-like meditations, *Tierra sin nadie, tierra de profetas*, p. 35.

¹⁹ Aldo Rico, *Conversaciones con el teniente Aldo Rico* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Fortaleza, 1989).

²⁰ See particularly Anderson, Chapters Two and Three, pp. 9–46. In fairness to Anderson, I should note that he certainly allows for the mythical, tribalist aspect of nationalism I support here. Indeed, his title *Imagined Communities* alludes precisely to this issue. What is peculiar in his book, however, is a repeated tendency to debunk imagined constructions merely because they are imagined and to seek firmer ground in material explanations. It almost seems that at times he seeks to distance himself from one of the most interesting insights of his book. Hobsbawm, in contrast, not only considers nations, artificial constructions but joins a long list of thinkers, Karl Marx and Adam Smith among them, who argue that nations will eventually become obsolete and disappear altogether.