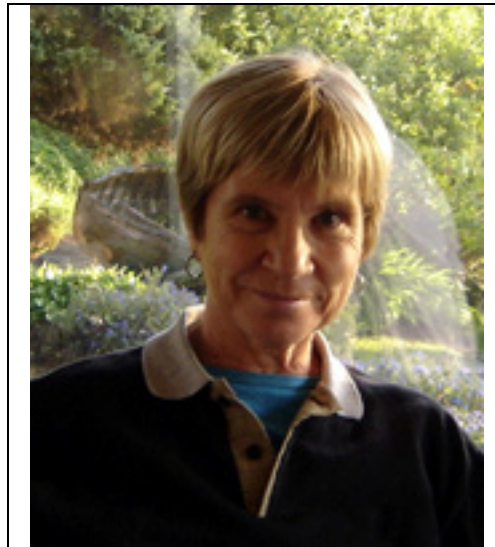


'We wanted to go on thinking, working, developing our skills' Interview with Hilda Sabato

By Edmundo Murray



Hilda Sabato
(Carlos Majauskas 2007)

Hilda Sabato is Professor of History at the University of Buenos Aires and research fellow of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET). She studied at the University of Buenos Aires (B.A., 1976) and the University of London (Ph.D., 1981), and published several books on social, labour and political history in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Argentina. Sabato has also edited two volumes of research, publishes regularly in academic and cultural journals, and participates in discussions and exchanges in the public sphere. In April 2008, Sabato was teaching in France. This interview was undertaken both by telephone and online.

Edmundo Murray (EM): What is the purpose of your trip to Paris?

Hilda Sabato (HS): I was invited to spend a month as Visiting Professor by the Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7, where I gave two lectures, established academic contacts, and carried out a fruitful intellectual exchange with colleagues and graduate students.

EM: I met some of your relatives and read some of their work. One could say that the

Sabato family of Argentina is a sort of Latin American version of the James family of Boston. How would you describe your family background and its influence on your working life?

HS: Well, the James family... but without the James family's fortune! Actually, my great-grandparents arrived in Argentina as working-class immigrants in the late-nineteenth century. Like so many other families of the same background, they made all the necessary efforts to send their children to college (or the local equivalent). They did not make money, but they succeeded in improving their lot, particularly in educational terms. Among the eleven sons of the Sabato migrant who arrived from Italy, only eight survived to adulthood: four of them went to university, while the other four did not – they had to work to help support the family. In any case, my mother and father belong to the second generation, and they both went to college. In the Sabato family, several members achieved academic, intellectual, and public recognition – my father among them. (1)

And when my generation's turn came, they were already a very important presence in our

lives. In my case, my parents' intellectual and public commitment was a key influence both in my professional life and, above all, in my civic and political involvement.

EM: Was your book about the Irish in Argentina with Juan Carlos Korol your first published work? (2) What attracted you and Dr. Korol to the research on the Irish settlements in Buenos Aires?

HS: That is a rather atypical story... This research was not prompted by regular academic requirements: There was no dissertation involved, nor any scholarship or funded project. It was the result of a combination of circumstances... When we decided to study the Irish in Argentina, Korol and I had just finished our studies in History at the University of Buenos Aires. But all our ties with our school had been cut off: the Government (Isabel Perón, 1974) had decided to send a hand-picked team to the University to replace the legitimate authorities, expel teachers and students considered to be 'subversive', and control all academic activity. Thus, the institution became an intellectual desert. Besides, we had been politically active in the student movement, and therefore could have been subject to persecution. It was in the context of that situation that we started our work on the Irish. Why? We wanted to go on thinking, working, developing our skills as newly-trained historians. But we were alone.

At the same time, I had heard a lot about the Irish in my family. My father's grandparents on his mother's side were Irish immigrants, and he had many stories both about his Irish 'side' of the family, and about his childhood (he was brought up by his Irish grandmother). (3)

Also, he had a strong affection for all things Irish, and a very rich collection of books on Irish history and literature in his library. We used to talk a lot about these topics, and he gradually infused in me an increasing curiosity and interest in the history of this immigration to Argentina. When things went so wrong at our University, and we were trying to find ways to continue our work and to avoid being defeated by the contemporary situation, I

succeeded in instilling some of that interest in my friend Korol. Once we got started, our enthusiasm only increased, as the subject proved to be more challenging than we had expected.

EM: You developed from economic to labour and then to political history. How do you see your career pathway from your research on the Irish Argentines to your recent book on Argentine political events? (4)

HS: It was not a straight path! The connection between our research on the Irish Argentines and my second work, my Ph.D. thesis at the University of London, is quite obvious. As we had studied the immigrants, I 'discovered' the importance of the agricultural sector to the history of Argentine capitalism, a topic that had been rather neglected in our historiography. The transition from sheep-breeding and wool production to labour is not so obvious, but it still may be easily explained. Labour had been a key factor in my research on capital accumulation in the ovine sector. At the same time, I had returned to Argentina and joined one of the few small research groups that managed to survive the dark years of the military dictatorship with international support and reach. (5) Several members of this group worked on labour history, and therefore I was influenced by our group readings and debates. The project that led to the book with [Luis Alberto] Romero involved several of us. From there to political history, the connecting road is harder to follow. Let me try [to explain]: My first project in this field was very much a follow-up. Our studies on labour were basically an exercise in social history, and I was now interested to see what had happened with workers in the political arena. But this move was not as easy as I initially thought it would be, and the transition from social to political history proved quite challenging. It required a different perspective altogether, and I had to immerse myself in the literature on politics, which was – by the way – experiencing a very significant revival in the 1980s and 1990s. The result was a new proposal, very different from the first project, which got me started on the long road that I am still travelling.

EM: When you studied the Irish land ownership patterns on the Pampas, you had recourse to elements of Marxist theory to establish the process by which some of the Irish in Argentina could manage to acquire their means of production (that is, sheep and land). After the fall of key Marxist political regimes in the twentieth century, and the adoption of neo-liberal policies by socialist governments, do you think that Marxist theory is still a valid tool to analyse historical processes?

HS: Marxist theory, like any other solid theory, is consistent and therefore 'valid' in and of itself. Whether or not it is useful to explain the world is another matter! As a historian, I have always utilised social theories in order to find concepts and categories that help me to make sense of what I find in the past. But I make rather eclectic use of those concepts. This means that I don't stick to any particular theory in visiting the past. In the case of the study of landownership patterns and capital accumulation, I found Marxist categories very useful to explore the origins of a capitalist economy and society such as the one I found in Buenos Aires during the second half of the nineteenth century, but I did not find the answers to my questions in Marxist theory.

EM: How is Marxist theory complemented by post-colonialist, gender and other schools?

HS: Marx would probably have been surprised to see the company he is in now...

EM: Are historians inclined towards teamwork with literary critics and other experts from different disciplines or do they prefer solitary research work with purely archival sources?

HS: It depends on the historian... I think the tendency towards dialogue with other disciplines is increasing among historians, but not everybody is happy with that.

EM: What connections do you see between the fields of Irish Studies and Latin American Studies?

HS: Until recently connections were rather scarce, but in that sense I believe SILAS can

make a difference, and we can expect more connections in the future.

EM: Is it true that the main difference between private and public universities in Argentina is political activism? Is it possible to be a scholar and to be active in politics at the same time?

HS: In Argentina, the main universities are public. It is in those institutions that most of the research and teaching are done. The relationship between politics and the university goes way back in our Western world, and there is nothing wrong with that. But the political and the academic world are two different spheres, and should be kept separate (though they are related). In Latin America, this key principle is sometimes forgotten, to the detriment of academic autonomy. This is not to say that the university as an institution is free from power struggles, and therefore, from internal politics, which comes with the job, so to speak. Thus, in Argentina, university politics has been the training ground for many of our politicians (both the good ones and the not so good...). I would like, however, to raise a different issue, that of the involvement of academics in public life. In Argentina, the typical twentieth-century figure of the 'public intellectual', who uses their expertise to address wider issues of social interest and speaks to non-academic audiences, has been a strong, and very positive, presence in the public sphere.

EM: At school, Argentinean children are taught from a young age to worship the visible representations of Argentineness (such as the flag, coat of arms, national anthem, and so on). Do you think the educational curriculum in Argentina is a nationalist one?

HS: The education curriculum in Argentina was strongly nationalist during the twentieth century. In recent times, there have been some efforts to introduce a more critical perspective in relation to national topics. How successful they may be, I'm not so sure...

Edmundo Murray

Notes

- (1) Jorge Alberto Sabato (1924-1983) was a leading scientist, professor of physics and researcher of nuclear energy, as well as an adviser to international organisations and the Argentine Government. His uncle is the celebrated writer Ernesto Sabato (b. 1911).
- (2) Hilda Sabato and Juan Carlos Korol, *Cómo fue la inmigración irlandesa en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1981).
- (3) Hilda Sabato's grandmother was the school teacher Brígida Condrón (1898-1926), daughter of James Condrón of Westmeath and Sarah Tobin, farmers in Rojas, Buenos Aires province.
- (4) Hilda Sabato, *Pueblo y Política: Claves Para Todos* (Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual, 2006).
- (5) Programa de Estudios de Historia Económica y Social Americana (PEHESA), an Argentine research centre for the study of social history, was established in 1977 by a group of historians in association with the Centro de Investigaciones Sociales sobre el Estado y la Administración (CISEA).

Books by Hilda Sabato

- *Cómo fue la inmigración irlandesa en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1981), with Juan Carlos Korol.
- *Capitalismo y Ganadería en Buenos Aires: la fiebre del lanar, 1850-1880* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1989). Revised edition in English: *Agrarian Capitalism and the World Market: Buenos Aires in the Pastoral Age, 1840-1890* (Albuquerque, NM: New Mexico University Press, 1990).
- *Los Trabajadores de Buenos Aires: la experiencia del mercado, 1850-1880* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1992), with Luis Alberto Romero.
- *La política en las calles: entre el voto y la movilización: Buenos Aires, 1862-1880* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1998). Second edition (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2004). Revised edition in English: *The Many and the Few: Political Participation in Republican Buenos Aires* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- *Pueblo y Política: Claves Para Todos* (Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual, 2006).
- **As editor:**
- *Ciudadanía Política y Formación de las Naciones: Perspectivas Históricas de América Latina* (México, D.F. : Fondo de Cultura Económica y El Colegio de México, 1999).
- *La Vida Política en la Argentina del Siglo XIX: Armas, Votos y Voces* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003).
- *De las Cofradías a las Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil* (Buenos Aires: GADIS, 2003), with Roberto Di Stefano, José Luis Moreno and Luis Alberto Romero.
- *La Argentina en la Escuela: la Idea de Nación en los Textos Escolares* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Ediciones, 2004), with Luciano de Privitellio, Silvina Quintero and Luis Alberto Romero.