

**Sermon about democracy. On equality
and democracy in Latin America based on “Ariel”
by José Enrique Rodó**

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Abstract:

The article is dedicated to the analysis of the essay “Ariel” wrote by José Enrique Rodó. This is one of the most important works of an essayist. He presented in it a socio-political project which could help Latin America defend itself against the influence of the hegemonic community of the United States. His proposal is an attempt to answer the question of what political system would be capable of responding to the needs of young North American countries. This made it necessary for the Uruguayan essayist to address the problems of egalitarianism and elitism. The author of this article attempts to present in a synthetic way how the two concepts are interpreted by the essayist and how they are used in the creation of his own political concept.

Keywords: democracy, “Ariel”, elitism, Latin America, Rodó

One of the most important text influencing Latin American identity – the essay “Ariel” written by José Enrique Rodó (1922), was published in Uruguay in 1900. This work, alongside Ruben Darío’s literary production, was shaping and inspiring the language of Latin American modernism, moreover it is considered to be of great importance

to the development of essay writing in that cultural and literary circle. The historian Enrique Krauze, in his text “La invención de *Ariel*” (2003) portrays this essay as potential initiator of native Latin American ideology, he is also indicating that this is the first interpretation which comprehensively addresses the issue of relations between the United States and South America. In the context of this assessment Ariel’s main theme becomes clear. It has to be emphasized that being important representation of Latin American philosophy Rodó’s text is primarily a record of the experiences, where for South America was another border experience after following the colonization and fight for the independence.

Rodó’s analysed text is a combination of an essay and a story. It begins with a composition frame, which presents the last lesson given by the master to his young students. In the main body, as well as in the dedication¹, of this *secular sermon* (García

¹ In the quoted edition the dedication is omitted. Compare in Rodó, José Enrique. 1976. *Ariel; Motivos de Proteo*. Venezuela: Biblioteca Ayacucho.

Monsivais, 2008), the youth is indicated as the target audience. In the first meaning these are the young members of the Latin American community, perhaps already educated in the new educational system, as result of some liberal changes. The study of the essay's main theses however, could lead to the identification of the youth of newly created Latin American countries as a target audience.

That essay deals with at least a few extremely important topics that at the time of its creation, seem to be crucial for Latin American. In it, Rodó comments on a role of young people in both, previously mentioned meanings, as a consequently he is questioning an importance of social role of an intellectual. The form of the essay allows the author to use numerous quotes, which in turn enable the essayist to discuss the issue of otherness and native belonging viewed here as the influence of so called "foreign" culture on a Latin American tradition. The political threads are fundamental in this text, nevertheless the term "political" should be interpreted in a very broad sense. Rodó undertakes to analyse the democratic social and political system of the United States, but first of all, he attempts to create his own alternative model for the South America which becomes the focus of the early critique of this essayist work. The critics commented on an author interpretation of the relation between United States and Latin America described as a relationship between actual egalitarianism of the first community and proposed elitism of the second one.

Although Rodó's essay was not directly created in response to the actions of the United States joining Spanish and Cuba

war in the Caribbean Sea, it is without doubt, that this armed aggression deeply touched Latin American intellectuals. It was the culmination of a nineteenth-century discussion on the dependence of the Latin American community on the growing power of the northern hegemony. In this case Rodó is the heir of certain tradition of thinking about South America's relationship with its northern neighbour which he exploited creatively. The first step in creating such discourse can be found in Simón Bolívar's thought. *El Libertador* in his speech in Angostura in 1819 reminded constitutional body that they are responsible for creating legislation which will not be in accordance with North American model but with the spirit of native Latin American community (1819). Thus he underlined the importance of the political independence of newly emerging republics from the United States. José Martí's work becomes the next stage in developing this tradition. In his text "Nuestra América" (2002) he made an observation that South America yielded to a fascination for *north*, he named this behaviour *yankimania* and described it to be destructive for the community. A few years later this topic was of interest to Rubén Darío, great prophet, who predicted in his text "A Roosevelt", which belongs to the volume "Cantos de vida y esperanza" (1980), subsequent actions of United States. Nicaraguan author, in his work dedicated to Edgar Allan Poe, portrayed figure of North America as a demonic being-enemy. A few years later he repeated this model in "El triunfo de Caliban" (1898), this text was a direct commentary on the events from 1898. The Speech of Paul Groussac it is also necessary element of this tradition (Reta-

mar, 2000, p.18). To complete the picture of the perspective in which Rodó created, it is necessary to add Justo Sierra (Bonfiglio, 2011, p.2), who was writing about a role of young Latin American in creating a new social and political reality, moreover he made clear which kind of relation should be built with representatives of other cultures².

The position of the text of Rodó within this tradition reveals two important elements. First of all, Uruguayan in his method and assessments of the United States was not secluded – the anti-American discourse had its own history and in this sense the originality of the essayist's work shouldn't be sought in the criticism of North America but in his language and the project which he proposed for Latin America. Secondly, the wide range of problems that have been raised in essay allows to think that "Ariel" was not a simple reaction to 1898. It seems that Uruguayan considered this dramatic circumstance only as a contribution to reflection on the much more serious threat hanging over South America – a spectre of North American democracy that was wandering through the lands of former Spanish colonies with great leaps, taking in ever new territories. Thus, "Ariel" was not so much a reaction to the political and economic dependence of parts of territories as an attempt to halt the further progress of the changes that North America spirit was bringing to the southern continent. Trying

to speak to the young America, he proposed to create a new Latin American community that would be able to oppose the growing hegemony of a spiritually foreign community.

The method Rodó used to tell his story was to take over the characters from Shakespeare's "The Tempest" and give them new meanings, which indirectly resulted from the political reading of this work by Ernest Renan in "Caliban. Suite de *La tempête*" (1878). Prospero, Caliban and Ariel became the metaphorical concepts with which Uruguayan built his report about relation between south and north continents, between the totally different social systems. Prospero, the master and the teacher who gives his students the last lesson, accepts Ariel as a concept-metaphor for presenting the spirit of the youth, which in the main part of the essay transforms into the spirit of Latin America itself. This text is interpreted as a contrast between Latin American and North American spirit, assuming that Caliban represents the United States. This simple model of identification is a kind of abbreviation which represents misreading of this essay. It is impossible to find unambiguous explanation for this relation in Rodó's work. This interpretation was dedicated by the tradition in which Rodó's essay exist.

Focusing on the topic of Caliban, it is necessary to keep in mind that the name of this figure, of "symbol of sensuality and stupidity" (Rodó, 1922, p.4) appears explicitly in the text of "Ariel" only a few times. Important is the fragment in which Rodó invoke Renan, his master and "the most amiable among the masters of the Modern Spirit" (ibidem, p. 61): "according to him

² The authors in question used different terminology to describe the same problem, but noting this difference is necessary to maintain reliability. Inspiration of north patterns Martí called *yankimania*. The same term used Darío and Groussac. Rodó, in contrast, used *nordomanía*, pointing out not a specific culture but geographical direction.

[to Renan] democracy is the enthronement of Caliban” (ibidem, p. 63). The essayist attributes such a thesis to a French thinker on the basis of his already mentioned work – “Caliban. Suite de *La tempête*” (1878). The fragment from Rodó’s text quoted above is precisely the one from which the interpreters wanted to formulate conclusion, that the author represents unambiguously juxtaposition of Caliban – United States/democracy. This interpretation, if one understands it as a mental abbreviation, although it seems to be completely justified, does not allow one to notice the subtlety which is present in Rodó’s thought about various models of thinking about community.

It should be clearly stated that Rodó’s attitude to both models – to order of egalitarian democracy and to community which basis is existence of strong elites – is critical. This aspect of Uruguayan socio-political thought is not really visible when one wants to read “Ariel” in the key of unambiguous pairs of figures and concepts Ariel – elitism, Caliban – democracy. While Rodó certainly positively describes and evaluates the spirit of the wind and the representative of matter condemns, the attribution of political concepts to these characters is not so unambiguous. These two attitudes are represented by examples taken from different orders, what perhaps makes it difficult to extract the multidimensional aspects of Rodó’s analyses.

Rodó studied the democracy on the basis of the system binding in the United States of America. In this case it seems that Uruguayan examined some really existing political and social order, which he learned from Alexis de Tocqueville’s work, because he never managed to visit north continent,

unlike some others Latin American authors, who took up this topic (for example Domingo Faustino Sarmiento). In this sense Rodó tried to reference to same real social practice, which others thinkers could experience. He didn’t analyse the democracy in its institutional sense, didn’t criticise particular legal practices focusing only on the basic assumption which underline its existence and, what is perhaps more important, on its social consequences.

In contrast to the first model, the second model of community Rodó analysed on the basis of European socio-political thought and didn’t refer to any specific existing political organism. The consequence of this perspective is that Uruguayan mainly studied political system based on elites using the writings of his master Ernest Renan. In this case he didn’t confront his concept with real political life. The essayist reveals his attitude towards the French thinker revealing by the same time his opinion about Renan’s political solutions.

This strange incompatibility of the two levels of analysis seems to have its justification in the real purpose of this essay – propose to the Latin American community a new project that, if could be completed, could prevent this civilisation from becoming increasingly dependent on the United States and from falling into moral and spiritual decline. In this sense, the Rodó’s project was an attempt to find an ideal solution from among actual socio-political practices and the European projects of these practices. Because of this reason, Uruguayan’s was accused of two fundamental deficiencies. One of the directions of “Ariel” criticism accused the author of lack of originality, attributing to him the mechanical

copying of European solutions. For the critics this meant that this idea is inadequate for Latin American social reality³. Other critics focused on the substantial generality and theoretical dimension of the project, which does not contain any guidelines for its practical implementation, which would make the Rodó's proposal a utopian construction. Both these directions of interpretation ignore the fact that the author, who never made any attempt to create a concrete and unambiguous philosophical system or political program, thought of his text as a basis for *paideia* rather than as a proposal to introduce certain changes within the real politics viewed as taking action by appropriate social or state institutions. The change of South American society and the formation of a new system should be created by working at the most elementary level – at individual dimension. In this sense, Rodó's text, in the method that he adopted, seems to oscillate between antique thinkers as his contemporaries, such as Schiller or Renan. Like them, it presupposes the possibility of creating a new and better community through education in a very broad sense, and not through from above political changes.

The basic thesis that Rodó must accept in his essay is the understanding of democracy as a historical necessity for Latin America, but also for all other communities. In "Ariel" Uruguayan noted: "yet the spirit of democracy is essentially, for our civilization, a principle against which it were idle

³ It seems that the prosecution was completely unfounded. J.E.Rodó in his other writings took up the subject of recreation and originality in relation to the European legacy. Compare it with for example Rodó, 1970, p.171.

to rebel" (Rodó, 1922, p. 76). In this sense, the essayist, so often accused of a lack of political and social realism and anachronism, was very modern in his thought and seems to be aware of the significance of democracy for the development of new societies. Rodó did not have enough courage to make the step which made some of the anti-revolutionaries⁴ – the total rejection of the democratic system. However, he saw the need to seriously and deeply rethink democratic basic principles, which, as Uruguayan argued in his essay, lead to the collapse of democracy itself.

The assumption which essayist wanted to reread is democratic equality. This aspect was the main point of criticism of United States political system. Although the concept of equality didn't arouse Uruguayan reluctance, he thought, that Americans interpretation of this figure is mistaken. "Any equality of conditions in the order of society, like homogeneity in nature, is but unstable equilibrium" (Rodó, 1922, p.65). In this quotation it is possible to see Rodó's ambiguous attitude to equality. First of all, he understood it as a state which is contrary to nature, which in numerous part is a tool to justify certain theses from the area of political philosophy⁵. Secondly, it is manifes-

⁴ Antirevolutionaries is understood in this context as it proposed A.Compagnon in his work *Les antimodernes: de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*. Compare with Compagnon, 2007.

⁵ In this context appears very interesting problem in "Ariel". In his essay Rodó adopted a specific method of thinking, a *scientific method* which is based on searching for the legitimacy of social solution and social order in the unsocial nature. With this assumption social life is similar to natural life. This is extremely important to justify the misinterpretation of the concept of equality and to justify

tation of the understanding of equality as equal condition – initial equality of opportunities. No other equality is possible either to exist or to maintain. This allowed him to formulate following conclusion:

the duty of the State consists in seeing that all its members are so placed as to be able to seek without favour their own best; in so arranging things as to bring to light each human superiority, wherever it exist. In such wise, after the initial equality, inequality, when it comes, will be justified; for it will be sanctioned either by the mysterious powers of nature or the deserving merit of volition. So understood, democratic equality, far from antagonizing a choice of either customs or ideas, will become the useful instrument of the spiritual election, the native soil for culture (ibidem, p.80).

In this section it is possible to see the essence of Rodó's understanding of equality,

the proposed aristocratic system. This is related with this how Rodó understood the problem of evolution which is also somehow stamped in "Ariel". For Uruguayan evolution in the Darwinian sense is in force for peoples and for societies. They are subject to moral and ethical dimension of this process. Then for Rodó evolution has its spiritual aspect. This lead to the conclusion that Ariel, as a metaphor for a new Latin American subject "is to nature, that crowning of its work which ends the ascending process of organic life with the call of the spirit. [...] He is the eponymous hero in the épopée of man [...]" (Rodó, 1922, p.144). It means that essayist understood evolution as an intentional process, which pursues to create an ideal form. In this sense, Ariel would become a kind of *superhuman*, although in making this comparison it should be emphasized that Rodó was quite critical of Nietzsche's philosophy. In this conception acting for the benefit of community becomes and action for the spiritual development of the whole genre, what allows to see in this essay a project that transcends a certain temporality connected with dramatic events which were background for this text.

which allowed him to formulate the basic principle of the new democracy. This equality is only a starting point for the development of new equitable inequalities. Rodó did not aim to eliminate democracy, only wanted it to stop being seen as a source of equality, as Uruguayan was believing that it is understood in North American democracy. This system is founded on equal opportunities, universal access and social justice. However, it does not presuppose the stability of this equality. For Rodó, the democratic system is the best and the most rational instrument to create new, just elites. With accordance to with the spirit and will of society, new elites should be brought to power, initially as spiritual guides of the community, and consequently, perhaps, as real decision-makers. Democracy understood in this way seems to him to be completely in line with the principles which govern nature and does not thanks to contradict freedom. Rodó, in the initial phase of his project, didn't demand any kind of changes to the democratic system, he only wanted to change the way in which people think about this system, he tried to point to its real source and prove that the true purpose and effect of democracy is not universal equality as interpreted by North American democracy, but that it is a fair instrument for establishing new hierarchies. The paradigm shift in thinking about democracy is intended to lead, as a consequence, perception of the system as a transitional and necessary solution.

On the basis of critic of United States democracy, which is related with misunderstood equality, Rodó formulated a conclusion that democratic system is opposite to noble spiritual life, which should be

a purpose of human being existence. “The clash between the democratic rule and the higher life becomes a fatal reality when that rule imparts the disregard of even legitimate superiorities and the substitution of mechanical government for a faith in heroism (in Carlyle’s sense)” (ibidem, pp.68–69). This led him to the theses that democracy should adapt to Latin American society, not the other way round. Uruguayan wants South American democracy to be adapted to the needs of the continent and to be improved⁶. In these aspects it is possible to notice an element of *paideia*: not only Latin American youth, but also the newly established republics - young political communities - are to undergo some kind of education and training.

The change in the model of thinking about democracy is intended, as it was already pointed out, to lead to the creation of new inequalities, in other words, to the emergence of new social elites and a new aristocracy.

Rationally conceived, democracy always admits that indispensable aristocratic principle⁷ which shall concede superiority to the better man when recognized and sanctioned by the common consent. It consecrates, as much as aristocracy, the distinction of equality; but it resolves in favour of such qualities as are truly superior - those of mind, character, virtue. [...] In such wise recognizing, as a necessity for any progress⁸, the selection and predomi-

nance of the best equipped, it avoids the humiliation which in other human contests falls to the lot of the vanquished. “The great law of natural selection will go on functioning in human society only so long as it works more and more on a basis of liberty” said Fouillée (ibidem, pp.81–82).

This quotation can be a starting point for the analysis of the criticism of the elitist system which Rodó proposed in this essay. Uruguayan, as North American, rejected an aristocracy based on land ownership and also criticized this one whose membership depends on blood. As a strong opponent of the rule of the old aristocracy he called for a third way to be chosen - the establishment of a spirit aristocracy. The main difference, which is introduced in this concept, is the shift in emphasis from privilege to duty. The selected group is not characterised by more benefits, on the contrary, by more obligations. In such perspective, an unjust aristocracy turns into just elite. Belonging to this group would ensure ethical, moral, aesthetic and intellectual superiority, the basis for becoming an aristocrat of spirit would be to have a specific *arête*. This interpretation can be supported by the following fragment from the essay “Ariel”:

the odious character of traditional aristocracies arose in that they were oppressive in their action and unjust in their foundation, and so their authority became intolerable. Now

⁶ Compare with Rodó, 1922, p. 73.

⁷ It can be interpreted as a consequence of de Tocqueville statement that aristocracy never dies (compare with de Tocqueville, 2005, p. 207).

⁸ In this fragment it is possible to see a continuation of the thread of the relation between the development of societies, nature and evolution. To this

connection is added progress, which becomes the goal of social selection and evolution. In this sense, two orders are connected and unified: the order of nature, which is subject to evolution, and the social order, which is subject to progress. Thus, all the above concepts begin to explain themselves to each other.

we now that there exists no other legitimate limit for man's equality than that which consists in the dominion of intelligence and virtue, freely consented to by all. But we know that it is necessary that this limit shall exist. On the other hand, our Christian view of life teaches that those moral superiorities which are the basis of rights really give rise only to duties; and that each superior being owes to others more in proportion to his excess in ability over them (*ibidem*, pp. 82–83).

The elements of Rodó's project, which focuses on justifying the need of existence of certain aristocracy and conceptualizing it as a group more perfect in virtue, seem to bring the essayist closer to the French thinker⁹. The real relation between the two thinkers – Rodó and Renan – is much more complex. It is obvious, that in this parts of Rodó's work, in which he created his concept of nation and proposed some methods of improvement of community in political and moral order, he inspired his ideas by Renan's ideas. Uruguayan, in the same way as the French thinker, advocated moral and intellectual reform and understood the nation as a spiritual community and family (Renan, 1998). Both of them considered necessary to create new elites and to introduce foundations for the rule of the intellectual and spiritual or moral new elite (Renan, 1972). However, the difference lies in the principles which are to be the basis for

its existence. Rodó wished complete abolition of unjust family aristocracy, the titular privileges of long – established unjustified agreements. He wanted to replace it with an aristocracy or elite that rises, if possible, from all existing social group and with the universal acceptance. On the contrary, Renan called for the preservation of the family aristocracy, because for him the principle of birth is a just and legitimising principle of belonging to the elite. This rule, in his conception, should be connected with the emerging intellectual elite. Like a consequence he proposed combination of two values – affirmation of the principle of the old order and introduction of a new principle legitimising the power. The second main difference between this two discussed thinkers is located in the political system, which they accepted like a grounds of their project. Rodó as the basis for the new ruling group saw democracy, which should be a supplement to the power of the enlightened elite. In Renan's conception the necessary step to escape from democracy and the bourgeois flattening of social hierarchies is a return to the monarchy. At this point is manifested the fundamental difference in perspective between the two thinkers. It manifests in the direction in which they chose to carry out their transformations. Rodó seems to be very modern in this perspective, contrary to the accusations of some critics. He didn't resign from democratic achievements although he wanted to build a better society on it and by the same time he turned to the future. Despite the references to the ancient Greek world and the return to its values, Uruguayan, in order to create a new Latin American society, based his project on the achievements

⁹ It should be emphasized that in the essay Rodó distanced himself from his master. After explaining what Renan's aristocratic system should be based on, Uruguayan states: "these unjust, paradoxes, together with his famous ideal of an omnipotent oligarchy of wise men, are like the exaggerated image in a nightmare of some true though that as obsessed our waking hours" (Rodó, 1922, p. 77).

of his contemporaries. Renan's direction is reverse. The French thinker turned to the past making an attempt to save the old system, the old privileges and old values. This perspective shows that Renan and Rodó do not so much differ in methods as in the real direction of change, what ultimately makes them very distant from each other.

In the face of this ambiguous attitude of Uruguayan to both models of community, it seems that ultimately both of them are saved from compromising. Firstly, democracy, which changed into dangerous and monstrous socio-political system in the United States, is saved and rehabilitated by the essayist as a transitional moment. In addition, from democracy Rodó extracted the element of equality, which started to mean equality in condition of striving for perfection. To maintain this interpretation he proposed, as a solution of this problem, pass equal access to culture, education and free time, which should be the basis for the possibility of comprehensive development. Secondly, Uruguayan save the aristocracy which was discredited in Renan's version. Rodó would like to point out that more cultural capital is not so much a reason to be honoured as to work harder for the community. In this sense, he seems to be looking for a place for intellectuals in a new society. The educated elite should have their permanent place as, at least, spiritual guides of the community, thus, in fact, taking great responsibility for its fate.

Uncovering the ambiguity of Rodó's assessment allows us to see Latin America at the turn of the century as facing choices between very different community models. Seeing the possibility of such a complex interpretation of this position and the legiti-

macy of these systems it is possible to go beyond binary interpretation, which for some time was growing around the analysed essay. Thus, it is possible to save this text from an unjust assessment and brush aside accusations of the extreme exclusivity of the discourse, which were appearing very often in critic texts. In general terms, the analysis of the essayist's approach to democracy in correlation to aristocracy would be enough for fulfilling the purpose of this text – Rodó highlighted this aspect of his work as the most important¹⁰.

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¹⁰ Compare with Alonso, 2001, p. 194.



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