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Ships Stranded in the Forest

Debris of Progress on a Phantom River

by Gastón Gordillo

In this article, I examine the debris that modernist projects leave in space and the ways in which these vestiges are interpreted, generations later, by people haunted by the long-term reverberations of their ruination. Drawing on theories of negativity, I look at local memories woven around these spatial sedimentations with the aim of examining the interpenetration of space, history, decline, and subjectivity. My narrative focuses on the remains of steamships that the attempts to turn the Bermejo River into a commercial fluvial route left around the town of Rivadavia in the Gran Chaco region of northern Argentina. In the 1860s and 1870s, businessmen and officials hailed the navigation of Bermejo as a project that would bring progress and prosperity to a savage region under the control of indigenous groups. Shortly thereafter, the Bermejo shifted its course, the navigation schemes collapsed, and Rivadavia entered a period of decline from which it never fully recovered. In this article, I examine how local views of the debris of ships and of a monument erected to commemorate them evoke multiple absences, chief among them that of the progress that the ships were expected to bring to the Chaco.

The first time I heard about the ship stranded in the forest, I was in the village of Chalicán, at the foot of the eastern slopes of the Andes in northwest Argentina. It was July 2003, and while I was talking with a local man about ruins and other historical sites in the area, he told me that he had heard from an acquaintance that hundreds of kilometers to the east, in the heart of the Chaco plains near the Bermejo River, one could see the rusty overgrown remains of *un barco en el monte*, a ship in the forest.¹ The story immediately intrigued me. Given its shallow, meandering course, the Bermejo is not suitable for navigation, but I knew that more than a century earlier private companies had launched steamships on the river as part of an effort to create a commercial route across the Gran Chaco, then under the control of indigenous groups. I also knew that this river's challenging geography, as well as a change in its course in the 1870s, had left many of those ships high and dry. It was not entirely unlikely, therefore, that this man could have been referring to the actual remains of one of those ships. My initial curiosity was further piqued when shortly thereafter I began hearing the same rumor in towns located hundreds of kilometers from each other along the western edge of the Chaco, such as Orán, Las Lajitas, and Metán. Those who told me about the ship had not seen it in

person but seemed convinced of its existence, and many agreed that it was somewhere near the small town of Rivadavia, in the "far east" of the province of Salta.

Upon hearing these stories, I could not help remembering Werner Herzog's 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*, in which a rubber entrepreneur in the Peruvian Amazon in the early twentieth century made hundreds of indigenous men drag a steamship across a hill covered with jungle to reach another river on the other side. Both the film and the stories I was hearing about the ship stranded in the Chaco evoked images of out-of-placeness and incongruity, of a symbol of industrial modernity taken out of its natural element, water, and placed amid dry, overgrown spaces. And in both cases the ships had been the main vehicles of failed capitalist projects. In Herzog's film, the steamship made it back to water but was shortly thereafter washed away by rapids, crushing Fitzcarraldo's rubber-collecting enterprise. In the case of the Chaco, the image of a ship stranded in the forest was an immobile, poignant expression of abandonment and decline. Together with railways, steamships were the first master symbols of the speed of capitalist modernity and of the attempt by capital "to annihilate space with time" (Marx 1993 [1858]:539; see Harvey 1989:149). Set to overcome the geographical obstacles that the Chaco posed to global mobility and trade, however, these

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1. In Argentina and many parts of Latin America, the term *monte* means (in addition to "hill" or "mountain") a heavily forested area or "the bush." In the Chaco, it is the standard word people use to refer to the forests, 5–10 m high, that cover much of the region.

steamships not only failed to annihilate space but were in fact annihilated by it. The rumors I was gathering about one of these ships' vestiges, in short, pointed to the failure of the globalizing projects embodied by the ships but also, and more importantly, to the power that the awareness of their debris' existence seemed to hold, more than a century later, over the imagination of people living hundreds of kilometers away.

In 2004 and again in 2006, partly inspired by Walter Benjamin's ideas on the detritus of modernity, I set out for Rivadavia in order to trace back the source of those stories and analyze the spatial and social legacy of these failed navigation plans. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin (1968:257–258) famously envisioned progress as a storm that creates "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" and leaves "a pile of debris" on its wake. This view of progress as a destructive, debris-creating process coalesced in his enduring yet truncated project on the discarded, commodified spaces of modernity, such as the nineteenth-century arcades, the walkways surrounded by shops that lingered in the urban landscape of twentieth-century Paris (Benjamin 1999). Benjamin was interested in these markers of decay to highlight the contingency of capitalist spaces and values and to criticize the ideology of progress and its claim that it represents a seamless improvement of the human condition. Commenting on Benjamin's interest in the arcades, Susan Buck-Morss (1991) pointed out that "because these decaying structures no longer hold sway over the collective imagination, it is possible to recognize them as the illusory dream images they always were" (159).

The idea that ruins and material decay are particularly apt concepts for reflecting on the fragility and contingency of human products has long seized the European and Western imagination (Macaulay 1984 [1953]; Simmel 1959 [1911]; Volney 2005 [1791]; Woodward 2001). For decades, humanistic studies of ruins focused on contemplative, self-reflexive accounts strongly informed by so-called ruin lust, an eminently bourgeois engagement with ruins that peaked in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is marvelously embodied by Rose Macaulay (1984 [1953]). Yet in the past two decades, scholars have moved away from this largely subjectivist approach and toward analyzing ruins as sociohistorical configurations. This perspective has examined ruins as intrinsic components of any landscape and as sites constituted by wider social relations and fields of power. Some of the best-known studies in this field have analyzed how ruins, especially those from antiquity on the coasts of the Mediterranean, have been altered, imagined, and manipulated by state agencies and archaeologists to serve particular national and political agendas (Abu El-Haj 2001; Jusdanis 2004; Kohl 1998; Lowenthal 1985; Roth 1997; Woodward 2001). This literature has shown that ruins, like all places, are not univocal reified objects but dynamic social-spatial processes that can become sites of contestation over the meaning of the past and onto which social actors project manifold, often contradictory imaginaries and memories. As Christopher

Woodward (2001) put it, "ruins do not speak; we speak for them" (203).

Partly influenced by Benjamin, a growing number of authors have also been rethinking and expanding the very object of study to be examined under the rubric "ruins." This has implied within this field a shift away from the type of ruins studied by classical archaeology, such as vestiges from an ancient past or sites associated with heritage and tourism, and toward modern, contemporary, industrial forms of decay and destruction, the physical and social detritus created the world over by capitalist, state, and imperial projects and conflicts (Edensor 2005*b*; González-Ruibal 2008; High and Lewis 2007; Page 1999; Sebald 1998, 2004; Stoler 2008; Veitch 1997).

This article is situated within the latter body of work and focuses on a distinctive expression of material decay: modern means of transport and objects that were abandoned or destroyed. The spatial salience of this detritus, which is often but not necessarily associated with ruined buildings, has attracted some scrutiny, for instance, the abandoned cars that litter Appalachia (Stewart 1996) or the presence of destroyed weaponry and military vehicles in Ethiopia (González-Ruibal 2008). Photographers, in particular, have produced arresting images of this debris, such as Sebastião Salgado's (2005) work on the piecemeal dismantling of huge ships stranded on beaches in Bangladesh or Camilo Vergara's (1995) photographs of the detritus and ruined spaces of urban ghettos in the United States. But as Alfredo González-Ruibal has argued, the social relevance of these destroyed objects is often overlooked. "What is usually forgotten is the role of abandoned or destroyed things in these new ecologies—the production of destruction" (González-Ruibal 2008:253–254).

In this article, I aim to bring to light the social and historical relevance of these destroyed things, of this production of destruction, among local actors haunted by their latent presence on the landscape. My analysis is part of a larger project on the ruins of the conquest of the Gran Chaco (Gordillo 2009*a*, 2009*b*) and draws on what I have elsewhere called "the absolute spatialization of practice" (Gordillo 2004), an analytic methodological sensibility that views social practice as eminently spatial and searches for traces and sedimentations of past relations and conflicts in space. I argue that this spatial sensibility is important for further exploring and unpacking modernist development as a cultural-political project ideologically built on downplaying its capacity for failure and dislocation, a process that is attracting growing anthropological and historical scrutiny (Ferguson 1990; Grandin 2009; Li 2007; Stoler 2008; Tsing 2005).

Decades ago, Gaston Bachelard wrote that "space contains compressed time" (Bachelard 1969:8). Paraphrasing him, I argue that space contains compressed histories and that this spatial-historical compression is the result of destruction, dislocation, and rupture, a perspective that views space, in other words, as the product of historically situated relations and conflicts (see Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Harvey 1996; Lefebvre 1991 [1974]; Soja 1989). In particular, inspired by Theo-

dor Adorno's (1973 [1966]) negative dialectic, I argue that ruins as well as debris can be conceived of as spatial expressions of negativity, as places and objects that in being destroyed or abandoned no longer exist as the entities they were initially built to be. Ruins and debris, in short, reveal a fracture between the material decay one sees in the present and the configuration of that same place or object in the past; they evoke tensions, ruptures, and absences. Negativity, in this regard, is a particularly apt lens to analyze processes of ruination, for as Diana Coole (2000) has argued, "negativity is already political inasmuch as it signals the vulnerability and contingency of every phenomenon that appears to be fully positive and replete" (231). The negativity I advocate here, in this regard, should not be seen as part of a Hegelian, teleological, and orderly master narrative but as a situated, contingent, and open-ended practice of critical observation and negation of that which is (Buck-Morss 1977; Coole 2000). Memory plays an important role in the social articulation of this dialectic, for it is often through spatially situated imaginings of the past and the tensions they evoke that people try to make sense of their local geographies and of the debris embedded in them (Gordillo 2004; see Casey 1987).

In what follows, I examine the detritus that the navigation of the Bermejo River has left on the geographies around Rivadavia and the ways in which these traces are read, generations later, by people still affected by the long-term reverberations of that project's failure. I begin by examining how local actors currently draw on the memory of ships to interpret the absences that the demise of the project, symbolized by these ships, left in the region. I then move back in time to analyze the attempts to navigate the Bermejo and the utopian, teleological view of progress evoked by the actors who thought that those steamships would open up the Chaco to capitalist modernity and global trade. Finally, I examine local views of the abrupt decline of Rivadavia that followed the end of the navigation schemes and the way in which local perceptions of the vestiges of ships are intertwined with a local monument erected to commemorate them.

In Rivadavia: "This Was a Flourishing Town"

When in July 2004 I told people in other parts of the province of Salta that I was soon heading to Rivadavia to do fieldwork in the area, several among them looked at me perplexed and shook their heads in disbelief. For them, the idea of "going to Rivadavia" was almost tantamount to traveling to the very edge of geographical space, to a place that clung to the map of the province only through a tenacious imaginative effort. In fact, the allure of the stories about the ship in the forest among people at the foot of the Andes had much to do with its rumored location in a region, Rivadavia, that seemed an unlikely spatial repository for such debris. Stretching along the eastern limit of the province, Rivadavia is one of the

poorest and most marginalized districts of Argentina. In Salta, the centers of power have been historically located in the Andes, and as a result the Chaco lowlands and in particular the Rivadavia district evoke elsewhere in the province images of backwardness and geographical and cultural remoteness. This perceived distance is highlighted by the fact that in addition to criollos (settlers of racially mixed background) who live in poverty, the region is home to a relatively numerous indigenous population primarily made up of Wichí (the largest indigenous group of the western Chaco and part of the Mataco-Maka linguistic family). The town of Rivadavia, furthermore, is located in one of the most remote corners of the district, south of the Teuco River (the northern arm of the Bermejo). The notable paradox is that a century and a half earlier, this town had briefly come to embody the progress and wealth that the navigation of the Bermejo was expected to pour on the province as a whole. Yet these plans' failure left behind a desolation that elsewhere in Salta is currently taken for granted as a natural side effect of Rivadavia's remoteness (fig. 1).

I departed for Rivadavia from the city of Orán and drove for a couple of hours, heading south along the foot of mountain ranges. At the road crossing in La Estrella, the paved road continued heading south, and I turned east toward the vast, flat expanses of the Gran Chaco. As I began driving on a gravel road, leaving behind the mountains and the last stretch of pavement for hundreds of kilometers, the geography expanding ahead felt particularly daunting. Even though by then I had almost two decades of fieldwork experience in the Gran Chaco, there was something about my previous knowledge of Rivadavia's history that made me feel slightly insecure about my capacity to handle that place. The clatter of rocks from the gravel road mercilessly hitting the bottom of my small car, threatening to leave me stranded in the middle of nowhere, did not help to appease that feeling. Yet the car held, and after a slow 5-hour drive through a monotonous landscape dominated by vast expanses of *monte*, I saw a dilapidated signpost that marked the dwellings emerging ahead as my destination (fig. 2).

Even though I had prepared myself to encounter a small, desolate-looking town, Rivadavia was smaller and looked more desolate than I had anticipated. Before I realized, I had driven through the town's six streets and reached its eastern edge. The few people on the street looked at my car with a gaze that I was not sure meant surprise or wariness. The previous year, a man who had told me about "the ship in the forest" had mentioned that on Rivadavia's plaza one could see *la caldera*, the steam boiler of that ship. After getting a room in a pension, I walked straight to the plaza, a semiempty square in which a few squalid trees stood on dry, hardened soil. Indeed, there it was: a 2-meter-long metal structure resembling an engine of sorts painted in white and supported by cement pedestals. No plaques or signposts explained its significance or history. That silent monument hinted at a twofold absence: the ghostly remains of the ships that had

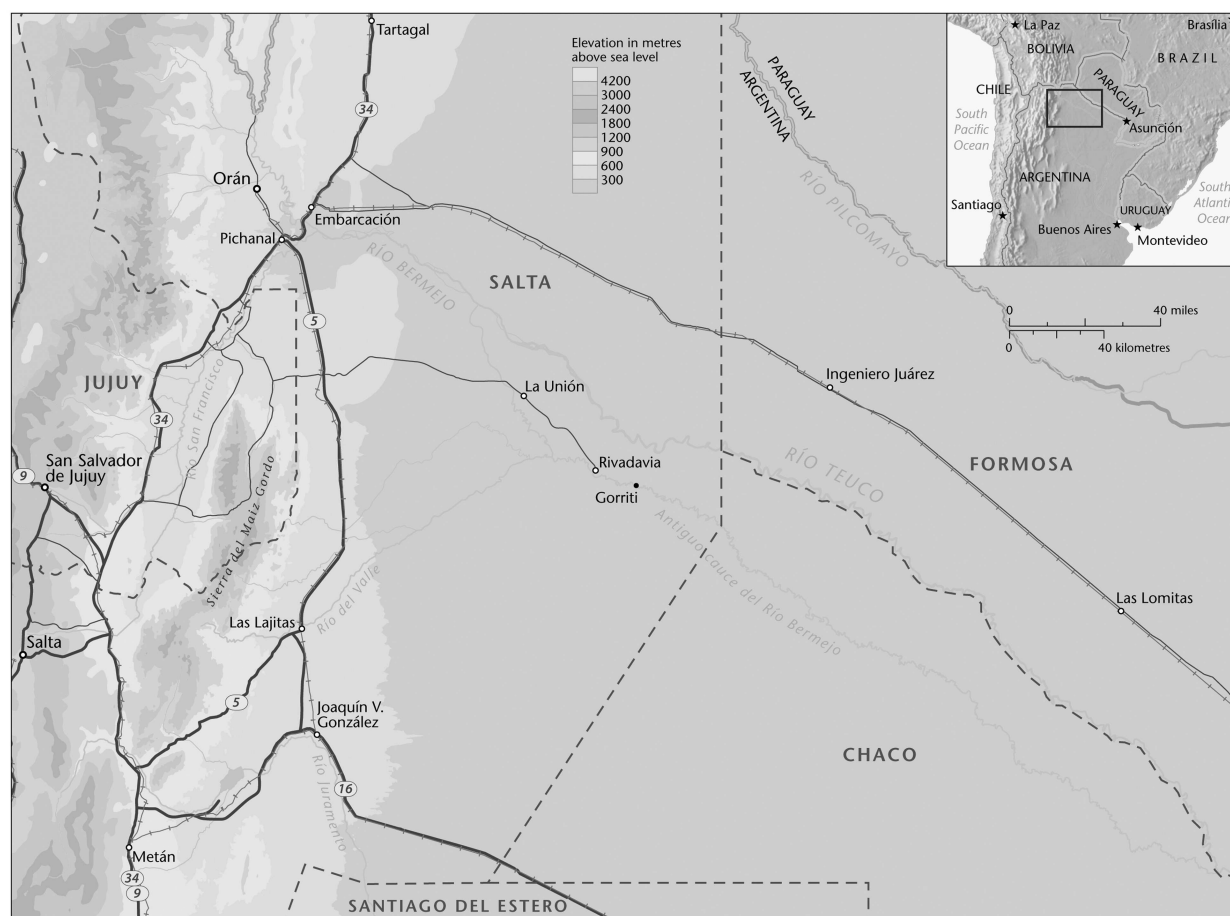


Figure 1. Bermejo-Teuco River, the old course of the Bermejo, and main places mentioned in the article. Map by Eric Leinberger. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

attracted me to Rivadavia in the first place and the past presence of a river that was no more (fig. 3). In the late nineteenth century, the waters of the Bermejo that had once flowed next to Rivadavia carved out a new course more than 20 km to the north, the Teuco, and left behind a dry riverbed on the edge of town.

I walked one block south of the plaza, where the street ended abruptly and the terrain, covered with bushes and trees, slid down toward a wide depression. In the backyard of an old house facing the dead-end street, two middle-aged men were repairing a pickup-truck engine. I approached them and asked them whether that slump was the old course of the Bermejo. "Yes," one of them said. "In the past, ships navigated the river. Did you see the boiler on the plaza? It belonged to one of those ships." I was impressed by how readily my question about the dry riverbed triggered references to ships and the monument on the plaza. I walked to the edge of the depression, and the view was notable: what had been the banks of the Bermejo were clearly laid out on the sides of a relatively

wide slump, almost 200 m wide, now covered with bushes and crisscrossed by trails. On contemplating a space on the English coastline that had once contained a medieval town, W. G. Sebald (1998) wrote, "you can sense the immense power of emptiness" (159). Sebald was inadvertently drawing on the negativity of absences, and I felt that a similar power emanated from what once had been the Bermejo River. The dry riverbed looked like an enormous relic that bore witness to that town's dislocation, a permanent reminder that water once flowed through that now dry expanse and that the motive for the town's location in that site, the river, existed no more.

After a few days in Rivadavia, it was clear that the collective memory of the steamships that had navigated the river and the dramatic disruption created by the river's disappearance were central to local subjectivities. Everybody I talked to, criollos and indigenous alike, told me something about "los barcos" that once connected Rivadavia with faraway places. Older people in particular assured me that in their youth they had heard stories from elders who had seen them in person,



Figure 2. Arriving in Rivadavia (photograph by author). A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

coming and going on the river. Some people recited some of the ships' names: *Orán*, *Sol Argentino*, *Leguizamón*. Yet the image that surfaced repeatedly in most accounts was the depiction of how the drying up of the river left those ships stranded in different parts of the region. A week into my fieldwork, I was driving on poorly marked trails west of Rivadavia and stopped to ask for directions at a small house. An old criollo man greeted me, and shortly thereafter we were talking about the region's history. "They say that the river was around here," he said. "But then it dried up, and the water was already cut off in one place. There were ships that passed over here. But then it dried up and the ships stranded and got covered with dirt." We were in a semiarid zone with patches of sandy soil, and the man's references to "the river" and "ships" passing nearby were revealing of the dramatic changes the regional landscape had gone through. They also highlighted the role of memory in historicizing and denaturalizing that geography.

Many people anchored the references to stranded and buried ships in concrete places, and I describe my visit to one of them below. Yet a recurring aspect of these narratives, especially among criollos, was that they saw the ships as emblems of the wealth that allegedly once marked Rivadavia as

a whole. Most criollos, in this regard, agree that Rivadavia was a very prosperous town whose growth was fostered by the riches carried by those steamships. This wealth was based not on ordinary items of trade but on "gold," "silver," and "treasures."

The man who first told me that the slump on the edge of town once was the Bermejo was named Luis, a man in his 50s who owned a small garage. He became one of my closest local interlocutors, and in our second conversation he told me about the prosperity of Rivadavia's early days: "This was a flourishing town. All the gold from the Alto Peru passed through Rivadavia, because it was the only navigable port." The view that the steamships were loaded with gold brought from mining centers in the Andes is widespread in the region and blends actors and imageries from the Spanish colonial era and Argentina's postindependence period; it also grounds the past wealth of Rivadavia in its capacity to be linked with faraway prominent places.

The view that these ships were marooned makes many people also argue that the disappearance of the river left myriad if elusive treasures strewn across the geography of the Chaco. Leandro is an articulate man in his 30s whom I met on that 2004 trip, and he is the pastor of a local Pentecostal



Figure 3. The boiler on Rivadavia's plaza (photograph by author). A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

church. He lives near the banks of the old river, and he told me that when he was a boy, a neighbor told him that a long time ago a group of men had unloaded a pot full of gold and silver coins off one of the ships and buried it next to a large tree, on what is now the dry riverbank. He never did anything about it, but years later strangers arrived at night in a pickup truck, dug in that exact spot for several hours, found "the gold and silver," and promptly disappeared. Leandro then shifted the tone of his voice, "We have the dream, according to what the Bible says, that the old rivers will return to their old beds. We have the dream that someday it will return, because in those days Rivadavia was very rich." In his eyes, the riches brought by the ships had been found not by local people but by strangers who mysteriously arrived from far-away lands. Relying on biblical imagery, he invoked nostalgically the past wealth of Rivadavia to imagine the possibility of a future prosperity based on the return of the river.

Svetlana Boym (2001) argued that nostalgia "is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's fantasy" (xiii). The nostalgia that many criollos in Rivadavia feel for their town's past is certainly charged with such romance, particularly the view that the town was indeed a pros-

perous place. This memory silences the violence and labor exploitation that were part and parcel of this town's early days, as we shall see. Yet the nostalgia that predominates in Rivadavia is of the type that Boym calls "reflective," nostalgia that, in contrast to the essentialist, grand, and totalizing nostalgia of nationalist revivals, is fragmentary and "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (41). In this regard, the nostalgia that prevails among criollos in Rivadavia is spatially tangled with the detritus created by the town's decline and with a sense of estrangement from the buried treasures that such wealth allegedly left in this disrupted geography.

The view that the ships that docked in Rivadavia carried treasures is shared by the local indigenous people, the Wichí, who live in semiproletarianized *barrios* (neighborhoods) in Rivadavia and the town of La Unión (farther west) and in rural hamlets scattered over a wide area. As descendants of the original inhabitants of the region, the Wichí carry the burden of the savagery attributed to their ancestors and regularly suffer discrimination by working-class criollos and the small local elite of merchants and landowners. Both Wichí and criollos talk openly about these tensions and evoke the

violence that not long ago pitched the two groups against each other. Yet while also remembering the ships as carriers of wealth, the Wichí memory of the navigation schemes is notably different from that of most criollos. In October 2006, in the village of Santa Rosa, west of Rivadavia, I met one of the local Wichí leaders, a man in his 60s named Gabriel. I soon noticed that he was suspicious of my presence, especially when I began asking him about the vestiges of ships. A few days later, when we had talked several times and he had warmed up to me, he admitted that he initially distrusted me because he thought I was a treasure hunter. He then said, after I had mentioned the remains of a ship located (as we shall see) 15 km from Rivadavia, “There’s another ship, but they don’t know where it got buried. And they say it’s full of things. That’s why many are interested in finding it.” He paused for a moment, and said, “The ships arrived when they came to fight the *aborígenes* [indigenous people].” Despite sharing the view that the ships carried riches, he was clearly not nostalgic about them. For Gabriel and many other Wichí, these ships embodied the arrival of the social actors who would unleash unparalleled violence on their ancestors and try to expel them from their lands.

The Assault on the Bermejo: “A Comfortable, Fast, and Economical Route”

The idea of opening a fluvial route across the Gran Chaco was an old dream of the Salta elites that goes back to the times of the Spanish colony, when armed indigenous resistance had turned this tropical plain into a bastion of “infidel Indians.” As elsewhere in the Americas, the idea of penetrating savage spaces through rivers became part of an imperial geographical imaginary (Muehlmann 2008; Raffles 2002; Schama 1995). Flowing from the Andes to the Paraguay River, the Bermejo is the main river that cuts through the Chaco and was therefore imagined as the natural path for a civilizing route. In contrast to most of the Spanish land expeditions to the Chaco, the attempts to navigate the Bermejo were from the start privately funded endeavors, which reveals the mercantile interests behind them. A prominent member of the Salta elite, Juan Adrián Fernández Cornejo, organized the first two expeditions downstream on small boats, led by Father Francisco Morillo in 1780–1781 and by Fernández Cornejo himself in 1790.² Even though some groups attacked the boats, most indigenous people viewed these expeditions opportunistically as sources of tobacco, clothes, and knives, and they constantly demanded these items from the crews. Upon arriving on the Paraguay River, Fernández Cornejo wrote in his

2. Cornejo also participated in the first stage of the 1780 expedition but abandoned it before the boats entered the Chaco (Morillo 1970 [1780]).

diary that he had finally opened “this precious door to commerce” (1970 [1790]:508).³

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the wars for national independence, the collapse of the Spanish empire in South America, and the civil wars that subsequently ravaged much of northern Argentina brought these projects to a temporary halt. The aim to turn the river into “a door to commerce,” however, was soon taken up by new generations of businessmen now committed to navigating the Bermejo in the name of capitalism, progress, and a new independent nation. After an ill-fated 1826 downstream navigation led by Pablo Soria,⁴ the attempts to begin the commercial navigation of the river reassumed with force in the mid-1850s, when the civil wars that had diverted attention away from the Chaco were gradually coming to an end and Argentina began embarking on one of the most ambitious projects of nation-building in the history of Latin America.

This project was led by elite factions who favored free trade, capitalist development, massive European immigration, and the conquest of the last bastions of indigenous “barbarism” within the national territory. In the second half of the nineteenth century, these modernist narratives acquired particularly optimistic and utopian overtones, which led to the view that Argentina was destined to become a world power on a par with Europe and North America and that backward regions such as the Chaco would soon be transformed into emporiums of wealth (see Arnaud 1889; de la Serna 1930; González 1890). Being pushed forth by actors based on the margins of the world system, this was a project of capitalist modernity with a distinctly nonmetropolitan, proud, self-confident character. The Buenos Aires elites viewed the navigation of the Bermejo, in particular, as one of the most promising enterprises to bring civilization to the hinterlands, and several Argentinean presidents and notable intellectuals publicly praised this project as central to the progress of the nation as a whole (as we shall see; see Arenales 1833).

These attempts at navigation were enabled by a new, eminently industrial means of transport, the steamship, one of the “transportation utopias” of the day—as Ricardo Salvatore (2006) has aptly called them—which, in contrast to ordinary boats, had the power to navigate the river upstream. In May and June 1854, Captain Thomas Page of the U.S. Navy led the first steamboat on the Bermejo and explored its lower and middle course (Page 1859:247–261), expressing the presence of a new imperial power in the heart of South America. In the following years, several boats and steamships, most of

3. All the translations from quotations originally published in Spanish are mine.

4. Pablo Soria, the owner of a sugarcane estate on the Chaco frontier, successfully completed the third navigation of the river when his boats and crew reached the Paraguay River. But upon landing at a Paraguayan military post, he was detained on the grounds that the government of Paraguay claimed sovereignty over the Bermejo and deemed his expedition a trespassing. Soria spent 5 years in prison, and the company he had founded dissolved (Arenales 1833:378–383).

them financed by Salta businessmen, set off downstream and upstream carrying cargo and creating the first trading networks between the Salta frontier and the Paraná River (Almeida 1976; Castro Boedo 1995 [1872]:90; Page 1859:261). Even though many of these expeditions failed because of attacks by indigenous groups or, more frequently, the ships sinking or being stranded in sandbanks, by 1860 the steamships *Alpha* and *Bermejo* had been able to reach sites on the Bermejo upstream from Esquina Grande.⁵ Criollos from Salta were beginning to colonize this area, and a missionary had recently founded there a station among Wichí groups, the first of several Franciscan missions on the Bermejo (Teruel 2005:37, 39–40).⁶

The enthusiasm created by the news that the *Alpha* and the *Bermejo* had reached Esquina Grande prompted the Salta government to establish a port on the river, and in 1862 the legislature decreed the foundation of Colonia Rivadavia (named after the first president of Argentina) downstream from Esquina Grande (Chiericotti and Comenares 1982:307). In July 1863, after a long and tortuous journey, the *Gran Chaco*, led by José Lavarello, was the first steamship to reach the recently founded port. Upon learning the news, the governor of Salta sent a letter to the Rivadavia political chief congratulating him for the voyage's success. The arrival of the steamer, he wrote, consolidated "the hopes and future" of Rivadavia and boosted the government's policies "in favor of commerce and industry, powerful elements of civilization, peace and progress" (quoted by Miller Astrada 1982:169–170). The people of Salta, he added, looked forward to "receiving the first and beneficial influence of this navigable route that will later on be a center of wealth" (170). Sharing this optimism, an Italian medical doctor involved in these schemes wrote "The navigation of the Bermejo River will immediately multiply the value of these deserted lands a hundred times over" (Mantegazza 1916:210). And multiply it did. Spurred by the expectations created by the navigation plans, the government of Salta subjected the margins of the Bermejo to a massive land privatization. In a few years, huge tracts of land were sold off or granted to speculators who expected to cash in on the navigation route and who introduced thousands of head of cattle into the region.

Expropriated from their lands and subjected to labor exploitation, some Wichí groups fled to the interior of the Chaco or sought out refuge in the Franciscan missions (Teruel 2005).

5. Even the ships that managed to reach Esquina Grande faced huge hurdles, and the *Bermejo*, for instance, marooned several times. In 1857, near Esquina Grande, intense floods took the ship off the river and onto a flooded forest, where it was stranded for a whole year. In the next few years, references to this and other stranded ships became standard in the accounts written about the navigation of the Bermejo (Aráoz 1884:28, 63; de la Serna 1930:242; Pellicchi 1995 [1862]:18, 32; Solá and Solá 1880:24).

6. The arrival of criollo settlers on the shores of the Bermejo can be traced back to the 1836, when the Salta government passed a law to grant land plots on the river in concession to settlers willing to occupy and work them (Teruel 2005).

Other groups resisted, and in the months following the foundation of Colonia Rivadavia, they launched a widespread uprising, attacking and sacking isolated criollo posts. The response by the national guards and criollo militias was ruthless and indiscriminate, and hundreds of Wichí men, women, and children—many of them unrelated to the uprising—were rounded up and executed (Fontana 1977 [1881]:106–107). In October 1863, the political chief of Colonia Rivadavia reported on the repression: "I have chased without quarter those treacherous savages in all directions, cutting their throats without mercy" (quoted by de la Cuesta Figueroa 1982:222; fig. 4).

Most of the businessmen fostering the navigation of the Bermejo were self-described humanists who favored a "peaceful conquest" of the Chaco (Castro Boedo 1995 [1872]:215–216; del Nieto 1969:60–61). Yet the trade route they envisioned could not but be accomplished through the violent imposition of new social relations on indigenous spaces. In fact, the crews on the steamships were all heavily armed, with rifles and, in some cases, small cannons. As with their predecessors in the late eighteenth century, most of their interactions with Wichí, Toba, and Vilela people involved recurrent requests by the latter for tobacco, knives, and clothes, which were often exchanged for fish, sheep, or arrows (Aráoz 1872:36, 43; Pelleschi 1886:48). Yet violence often marred these trips, and most of the ships were attacked, a reminder that their presence was not welcome and that it was accurately viewed as a threat to local forms of autonomy. The 1863 massacres around Colonia Rivadavia, in fact, made patently clear that the threat was real and that the navigation of the Bermejo was part of a violent process of conquest. This violence was also proof that progress leaves "wreckage upon wreckage" on its path especially when expanding successfully, in the eyes of its promoters, into new geographies.

In 1869, the *Compañía de Navegación a Vapor del Río Bermejo* (Company for the Steam Navigation of the Bermejo River) marked the pinnacle of the attempts to transform the river into a smooth space for commerce. Led by Buenos Aires businessman Natalio Roldán, the company began the most ambitious attempt to open a regular trade route between Buenos Aires and Colonia Rivadavia, and in March 1871 the *Sol Argentino*, the company's first steamship, entered the mouth of the Bermejo led by Roldán himself (del Nieto 1969; figs. 5, 6).

By then, however, Roldán was aware that a potentially serious hurdle was lying ahead, for he had learned that in previous years some sections of the Bermejo were shifting course. Some of the water was beginning to follow a new arm that branched off the main course upstream from Esquina Grande, ran parallel to it for more than 400 km (bypassing Colonia Rivadavia from the north), and then converged again with the main course downstream (more than 300 km east of

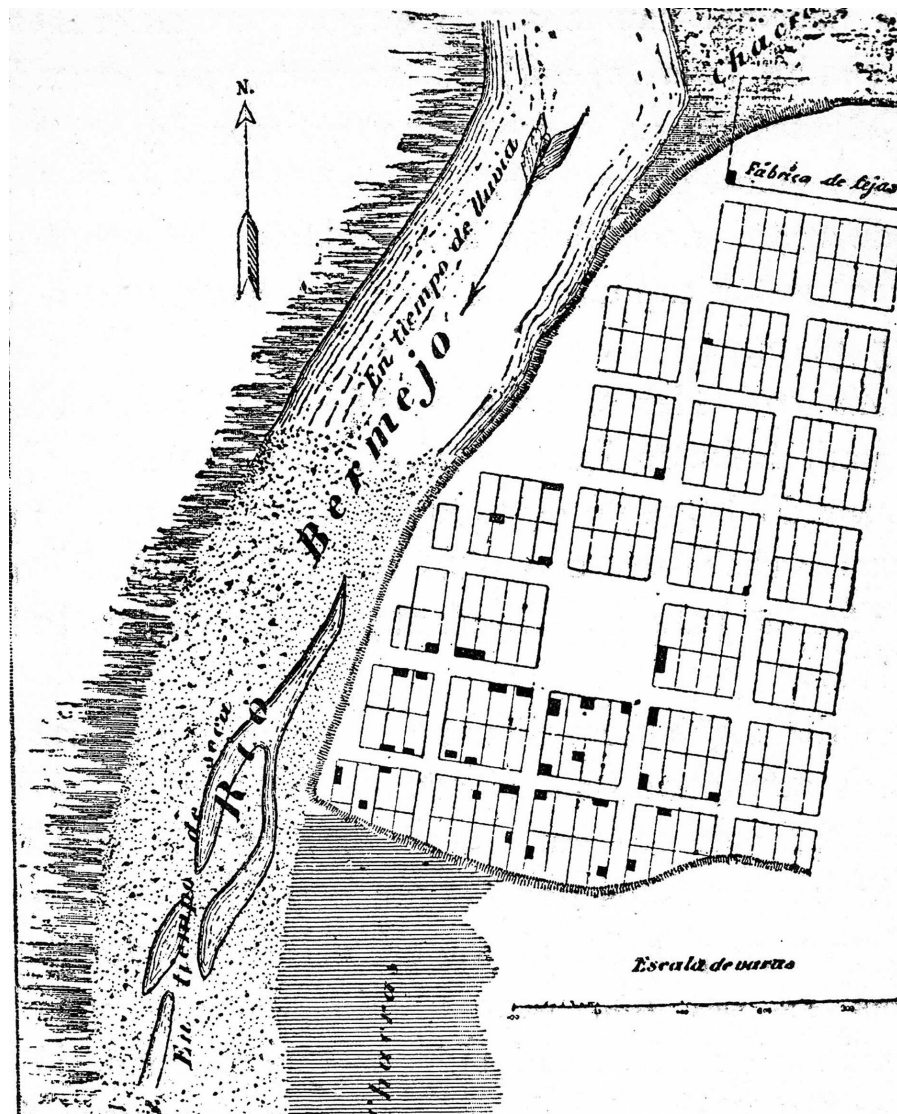


Figure 4. Colonia Rivadavia, ca. 1880 (in Aráoz 1884).

Rivadavia).⁷ Such changes have not been rare in the two main rivers of the Chaco, the Bermejo and the Pilcomayo, largely because of the huge amounts of sediment and debris they carried and the low gradient of the Chaco plain, which favor the gradual obstruction of old riverbeds and the opening of new courses (Gordillo and Leguizamón 2002). Yet the dramatic shifts taking place on the Bermejo in the 1860s and 1870s undermined the view, analyzed by Eduardo Rosenzvaig (1996), that the rivers of the Chaco were the only spaces that could serve as orderly channels of civilization amid an uncontrollable savage geography. The Chaco as a whole, including its rivers, was proving to be indomitable.

7. This new arm, the Teuco, had been first explored in 1862 (de la Serna 1930:251–253).

Roldán did not know the extent to which these changes on the river posed a threat to navigation to Colonia Rivadavia, but when the *Sol Argentino* reached the site where the Teuco and the Bermejo met, it was apparent that the latter carried much less water and that it would be hard to navigate on it all the way up to Rivadavia.⁸ The *Sol Argentino* entered the Bermejo, but soon afterward the river was so shallow it could not advance further. For several months, the crew waited for floods that could lift the boat, to no avail. The ship eventually did manage to reach Rivadavia but only after Roldán relied on the military to recruit three hundred Wichí men to do

8. First, Roldán decided to follow the Teuco, but shortly thereafter a sustained attack by a large group of Toba men forced them to turn around (Aráoz 1872).



Figure 5. Steamer *Gobernador Leguizamón* (in Aráoz 1884). A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

major work upstream to ease the flow of water (Aráoz 1884: 51, 372). Despite the setbacks faced by the expedition, in February 1872 an exultant Roldán wrote to the governor of Salta:

My program was accomplished: the navigation of the Bermejo is a fact and the exclusive right of the company that I represent, assisted very effectively by Your Excellency with the most decisive and enthusiastic zeal. I believe that this is the most culminating event that can be offered to the Argentinean people and our sister the Republic of Bolivia, by uniting it with the Plata basin through a comfortable, fast, and economical route such as the fluvial route on the Bermejo. (Quoted by Chiericotti and Comenares 1982:311)

Private entrepreneurship, in conjunction with state power, seemed to have been able to tame the unruly forces of nature in the name of transnational trade links. The hurdles that the *Sol Argentino* and other steamships had encountered on the

river seemed to be, at last, part of the past.⁹ When he returned to Buenos Aires, Roldán met with the president of Argentina, Domingo F. Sarmiento, who hailed the *Compañía de Navegación* as a *benefactora de la patria* (benefactor of the motherland; del Nieto 1969:62). Yet the work conducted in 1871–1872 was not enough to stop the Teuco from gradually becoming the main river and the old course of the Bermejo from drying up. In the following years, new ships bought by the company managed to reach Colonia Rivadavia but on several occasions were marooned in shallow waters (Castro Boedo 1995 [1872]:117–118).¹⁰ The *Compañía de Navegación*

9. Roldán's optimism was contagious. Guillermo Aráoz, a member of the expedition, wrote, just before describing in detail the multiple obstacles they had faced, "This itinerary will show how easy it is to navigate a river that has been for so long abandoned to the empire of savages" (Aráoz 1872:1).

10. This is, in fact, what happened to Roldán's 1872 expedition on the *Gobernador Leguizamón*. When Roldán finally reached Rivadavia on horses provided by the military party sent to his rescue, however, news-

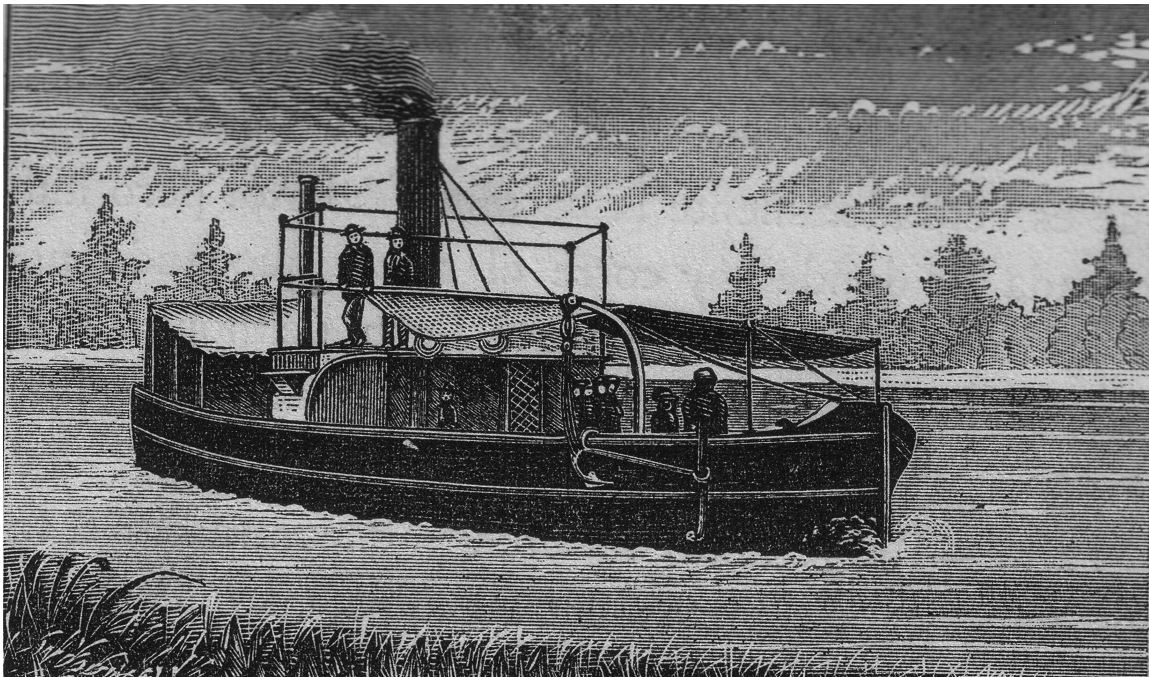


Figure 6. *Sol Argentino* (in Aráoz 1884). A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

responded to these challenges with the implementation of further and highly ambitious canalization plans aimed at preventing the old arm of the Bermejo from drying up. For several years the company recruited hundreds of Wichí men to remove sandbanks, logs, and trees from the Bermejo riverbed, erect dams, and dig canals (del Nieto 1969:58). The force of the river, however, prevailed. In early 1875, massive floods destroyed the dams and canals, washed away the two Franciscan stations upstream from Rivadavia, and consolidated the course shift toward the Teuco. In 1877, no steamship reached Rivadavia (Chiericotti and Comenares 1982:318). The following year, Giovanni Pellesci (1886:189), an engineer hired to assess the feasibility of the navigation schemes, examined the place where the Teuco branched off and estimated that it had taken four-fifths of the waters. Despite this, and even though the ship he had traveled on had also stranded on a sandbank, he wrote about the navigation of the Bermejo with unyielding optimism: “The Gran Chaco . . . by means of this central artery . . . [will] be placed in immediate and easy contact with the emporiums of consumption, of production, and of civilization” (Pellesci 1886:193; fig. 6).

Facing increasingly insurmountable obstacles to reaching Rivadavia, one after another the steamships owned by the *Compañía de Navegación* sank, most of them after hitting logs semiburied in the riverbed. The last ship of the company,

the *Orán*, sank in June 1881. This marked the end not only of the *Compañía* but also, in the words of José del Nieto (1969), of “the hope of dominating the river, always dangerous, untamable, which was treacherously destroying efforts, sterilizing sacrifices, in a struggle with no quarters” (62). The image of a treacherous river was inseparable from that of an indigenous savagery that was for centuries refractory to civilization (Gordillo 2001; Muehlmann 2008; see Taussig 1987). That the water had dramatically mutated its direction at the moment when private companies were trying to render it orderly and predictable seemed to confirm that the river itself, like the Indians on its margins, was hostile to them.

The attempts to navigate the Bermejo on a commercial basis, paradoxically, collapsed just before the Argentinean army launched its final military assault on the Chaco.¹¹ Even though Rivadavia had become the main wedge of colonization in the region, most of the Chaco was still off limits to state power. At the end of 1884, the Argentinean minister of war, Benjamín Victorica, personally led a massive military campaign aimed at changing this situation once and for all. The counterpoint between the sinking of the last commercial steamships on the Bermejo and the subsequent arrival of the

11. The resilience of teleological views of progress associated with the Bermejo, nonetheless, briefly resurrected plans to turn the river into a fluvial route in the following decades and even in the twentieth century, often erasing the memory of past failures (see, e.g., Clunie 1899; Henri 1917).

papers in Salta celebrated the event with the same optimism articulated the previous year (del Nieto 1969:60).

federal army on its shores was notable: what had been hailed as the most promising enterprise to bring progress and civilization to the region had crumbled even before the state had wrested control of those territories from indigenous groups.

When the army entered the region, it stumbled on the debris that the modernizing schemes it was coming to introduce had already left on the geography. The sight of a river strewn with abandoned steamships struck several of the officers and observers who arrived on the margins of the Bermejo. Gerónimo de la Serna, an engineer on a scientific team (*comisión científica*) assigned to the campaign, noted the hulls of five ships in the lower Bermejo and wrote that those remains illustrated “the dangerous characteristics that this river presents for navigation” (1930:244). The vestiges of ships were a potent material confirmation of the defeat of previous attempts to civilize the Chaco. The following year, a captain in the Argentinean Navy (the son of Thomas Page) who was navigating upstream was also impressed by the debris of sunken ships:

The first obstruction of any importance is the wreck of the twin-screw steamer Leguizamón, which lies in the very centre of the channel, and was at that time with her deck partially out of water, and piled up with a perfect promontory of drift-wood. . . . Once above the Salto de Yzo, I presently had to encounter the passes of the wreck of the Lavarello steamer, and that of the Yankee, both of which were overcome without accident, although they are uncommonly dangerous (Page 1889:140).

These vestiges in the river were not only reminders of past failures but had also become, in and of themselves, sources of danger that could damage and eventually sink other steamships. These were, in short, debris that had the power to create further ruination. The presence of this detritus was also ominous; it seemed to bring back from the past images of the future that awaited new civilizing projects. Upstream on the old course of the Bermejo, the wrecks of ships were on the increasingly dry riverbed that was being gradually overtaken by forests. In December 1884, the scientific team reached Fortín Gorriti, the first fort east of Colonia Rivadavia, and de la Serna noted that the remains of the steamship *Salteña* were clearly visible: “Two little cannons of this ship could be seen buried in the sands of the riverbed” (1930:149).

The debris that the attempts to navigate the Bermejo had left on the regional geography involved not only these ships but also Colonia Rivadavia itself. Cut off from the fluvial route that had briefly, if precariously, connected it with faraway places, the town entered its own process of ruination.

“Loneliness and Sadness Everywhere”

In Rivadavia, the nostalgic accounts that people shared with me about the wealth that once marked the town are intrinsically tangled with the memory of its subsequent near demise. The memories of prosperity examined above, in other words, are shaped by experiences of poverty and decline that people

unambiguously trace back to the shift in the course of the Bermejo, the end of the navigation plans, and the massive depopulation that followed them. This is partly why the current nostalgia for Rivadavia’s early days is reflexive and subdued and marked by an awareness of what came next.

On my second visit to Rivadavia, in October 2006, I stayed at a pension with a small diner owned by a 69-year-old man born and raised in Rivadavia named Alterio. One hot afternoon, while we were sitting at a table in the large indoor patio onto which the pension’s rooms faced, Alterio told me that his grandmother had seen the steamships pass by when she was a girl. “The ships navigated on the river,” he added, “and then everything dried up.” I asked him what happened afterward. “El pueblo se despobló,” he replied swiftly, meaning that pretty much everybody left. “There was nothing here. When I was a kid, when I went to school and a teacher arrived, he stayed for three months and then left. And he couldn’t come back because there were no roads. . . . There was no water, no electric light, nothing. We drank water from ponds several kilometers away. It had to be carried in barrels.” Other people who described the impact of the disappearance of the river gave me the same image of an abrupt depopulation that left desolation behind. Luis, the garage owner, told me that so many people left, most of them heading east toward the territory of Chaco, that “only two or three families stayed” (fig. 7).

Current memories such as these are consistent with accounts by visitors to Rivadavia in the late 1800s. In September 1878, Roldán and Pellesci arrived in town on horseback after leaving their ship stranded downstream. Pellesci (1886:159) was struck by how deserted the town looked and by the dry riverbed on the edge of town. In January 1885, the scientific team of the Victorica campaign arrived in Rivadavia after having spent several months in the Chaco. Leopoldo Arnaud (1889), the head of the group, was anxious to reach an outpost of civilization, but on entering Rivadavia with his men in formation, he was impressed not only by the desolation of the place but also by the locals’ fear and distrust: “The plaza was deserted. It seems that the few neighbors in the village looked at that event with terror” (192–193). Arnaud wrote about the decline that seemed to be sinking Colonia Rivadavia into oblivion: “This small village is destined in a very short time to be abandoned by its inhabitants. . . . We walked around and found loneliness and sadness everywhere. Everything is mournful there, even the buildings are scrawny and miserable” (Arnaud 1889:196–197; see also de la Serna 1930:155).

The scientific team moved forward and headed toward the Andes, craving actual markers of civilization. Arnaud (1889) wrote about his emotional and bodily reaction at the sight of the first telegraph poles as they approached, a few weeks later, the city of Salta: “I felt a commotion of respect and the impulse to kneel down and uncover myself in the presence of that manifestation of civilization. How many considerations were suggested to us by those mute representatives of progress!” (275). Condensed in those mute yet potent objects, progress acquired for Arnaud an aura that demanded religious



Figure 7. Abandoned house in Rivadavia, 2004 (photograph by author).
A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

reverence in part because he had been in a geography littered with the debris of progress.

These accounts, as well as people's current narratives, also reveal the unraveling of the relations that had briefly connected Rivadavia with distant geographies. The collapse of the navigation schemes and the town's decline are thus reminders that the "time-space compression" analyzed by David Harvey (1989), or the shrinking of global distances, has not been a smooth, unilineal process and that in some parts of the world this compression has been undermined, halted, and even reversed by the intricate ruggedness of space.

Decline is certainly not a unilineal process either. While telling me about the desolation that had marked the region, many people in Rivadavia also emphasized that the town was actually beginning to show signs of recovery, as if finally waking up from a bad dream. Highlighting that these changes had already left a desolate past behind, a middle-aged woman in charge of a small store told me "Esto era todo monte" (This was all bush). People pointed first to the population growth in the previous decade. This was triggered mostly by criollos moving into town from surrounding rural areas, which between 1991 and 2001, according to census figures, increased the population

from 953 to 1,608, an almost 70% surge.¹² Many also mentioned that Rivadavia was now connected to the regional electric grid (instead of depending on a diesel generator), that the construction of the gravel road in the 1980s now prevented the town from being cut off in the rainy season, and that buses from Orán came three or four times, instead of once, a week. The town, in short, was gradually rebuilding its links with other places, even if toward the Andes rather than the east. Rivadavia, in fact, stands at the very end of the gravel road, and few people travel east, a reminder of the massive geographical barrier that the disappearance of the river erected between the town and the eastern Chaco.

It was also apparent, however, that many of the recent transformations the town was going through were part of a new neoliberal wave of progress that was also increasing levels of poverty and inequality and creating new forms of ruination. Much of Rivadavia's recent population growth, in particular, has been fostered by evictions affecting criollo families in outlying rural areas, the result of the valorization and privatization of land following the rapid expansion of agribusi-

12. [http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rivadavia_\(Salta\)](http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rivadavia_(Salta)) (in Spanish).

ness 150 km to the southwest (around Las Lajitas and Joaquín V. González).¹³ Resurrecting old narratives of progress, the Salta government hails these agribusinesses as the source of the development that will propel the province into the future. Yet many in Rivadavia, especially people with relatives in rural areas, are wary of these narratives and critical of the evictions, which they see as the product of the arrival in the region of powerful actors alien to it. Rivadavia's population is well below the 1870 figure (when it reached 2,500) and still faces adverse socioeconomic conditions, depending heavily on government social programs and jobs at the municipality.¹⁴ In addition, the long-term environmental degradation caused in the whole region by the logging of hardwoods and cattle raising is particularly noticeable, and vast expanses of *monte* grow on heavily eroded sandy soil. Other markers of stagnation seem to have become part of the town's layout. On my first visit in 2004, Rivadavia had a small gas station. Two years later, the station was in ruins. Some of the oldest buildings in town, already abandoned during my previous fieldwork, had partly collapsed. In 2006, there was only one telephone line in the whole town.

However, reduced to a forgotten village that was almost wiped off the face of the earth, Rivadavia did linger for much longer than anyone in the 1880s would have predicted. This is why elderly people in Rivadavia transmit a sense of resilience not devoid of pride. Some of them regularly refer to Villa del Carmen, a hamlet founded in the second half of the nineteenth century like Rivadavia but that, unlike the latter, did not survive. Located 100 km upstream, it was destroyed by flooding and subsequently abandoned. In the 1930s, a local author wrote that of Villa del Carmen there remained only "ruins in the middle of the bush" (Oliva 1987:75). Some middle-aged people in Rivadavia know of these ruins, and Luis in fact visited them in the 1970s. "You can see the vestiges of the village," he said, commenting on his exploration of the overgrown ruins. "There was a place that looked like the church. But it all has become

bush now." The ruins of Villa del Carmen, in this regard, serve as a reminder that despite its decline, Rivadavia escaped that fate and was not engulfed by forests in the same way that that village and the vestiges of ships were. But in a place not far from Rivadavia, the remains of one of those ships were in fact visible for a long time.

The Ship in the Forest

In my first days in Rivadavia, everyone I talked to agreed that the boiler on the plaza came from a steamship that was stranded in a site called Gorriti, 15 km to the east on the Bermejito, a stream that flows 2 km south of Rivadavia carrying water from an old Bermejo tributary. According to rumors, remains of other ships were buried in remote sites around Santa Rosa and La Unión, west of Rivadavia. But the vestiges in Gorriti were the only ones that people claimed to have seen in person, even if they added that those remains had been scavenged as scrap metal and that sediments carried by the Bermejito had subsequently buried most of them.

After making an exploratory trip to Gorriti on my own that yielded no results, I finally met the man who several people told me could guide me to the actual site the boiler had been removed from. His name was Ramiro, a criollo in his late 50s who owns a few goats and sheep and lives in a humble adobe about 4 km from Gorriti. He had a thick white beard and the shy, slow voice tone of criollos not used to talking to strangers. Yet he seemed curious about my interest in "el barco" and agreed to take me to see the place in my car. We drove on the dirt road that leads to the province of Chaco and then followed a trail in the bush that branched off to the right. We were soon on the Bermejito, a 10-meter-wide stream corseted by 3-meter-high banks. We got out of the car and walked about 100 m downstream. He stopped and nodded toward the water. "It's here," he muttered. There was nothing noticeable about the place. "You mean the ship was exactly here?" I asked. He nodded in silence. I inspected the site carefully, and there were no visible traces of anything that could have been part of a ship, just the brownish waters, the muddy banks, and the trees and bushes behind us and across the stream. "When I was young you could see the top of the ship sticking out of the sand," he said. Back then, he added, the Bermejito carried little water and was usually dry. Like others in Rivadavia, he said that whatever was left of "el barco" was now underneath the water. He also commented that the ship carried "gold" and that gypsies had scavenged metal planks from it (fig. 8).

Even though in the previous days I had prepared myself for the idea that there was probably very little or nothing left of the ship, I was hoping that a few feeble traces would still be visible. Given the solid local consensus that the place was the site I was after, the absence of debris seemed to confirm that there were no longer ships in the forest in the region; no *Fitzcarraldo*-like sights of nineteenth-century steamships marooned in the Chaco with their broken hulls and decks overgrown with

13. Despite the distance, this expansion of the agricultural frontier has valorized lands in the much drier Chaco hinterland. A direct consequence of Rivadavia's depopulation had been the breakdown of property relations in much of the region. When the old arm of the Bermejo dried up, the value of land in the region also evaporated, and many of the cattle estates that had been created on its margins were abandoned. In the following decades, criollos moved onto those lands and began occupying them without holding title. Some landowners did stay put and imposed tight relations of domination on their land. But by the mid-twentieth century, much of the region around Rivadavia had become de facto collective land that was used and shared, in a situation of tension, mostly by impoverished criollos and Wichí groups. Yet with a new capitalist frontier brewing farther west, descendants of old landowners are beginning to show up in Rivadavia to claim their lands back, and existing landowners are less tolerant of "intruders" on their property, even if they have lived there for generations.

14. The making of charcoal was for decades a major source of income, but the depletion of hardwoods and the subsequent restriction of logging permits have constrained the availability of livelihood alternatives, and many men and women migrate annually to work in the bean harvest near Pichanal (200 km to the west).



Figure 8. In Gorriti. “When I was young you could see the top of the ship sticking out of the sand” (photograph by author). A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

vines. Yet it was also apparent that this was one of the sites and most probably the place that had been the source of the stories about “un barco en el monte” that I had heard hundreds of kilometers to the west from people who had never visited Rivadavia and most probably never would.

Some people in Rivadavia point out that the army once ran a small fort in Gorriti, of which no visible vestiges remain today. It was exactly there, at Fortín Gorriti, that in December 1884 Gerónimo de la Serna (1930:149) saw the semiburied remains of *La Salteña* that over a century later eluded me from underneath the waters of the Bermejito. According to Guillermo Aráoz (1884:60), *La Salteña* entered the Bermejo in 1875 and reached Esquina Grande. Manned by a crew of 10, the ship remained around Rivadavia with the directive of supervising the canalization works; soon afterward, it was stranded at Gorriti. For almost a century, the remains of *La Salteña* were clearly visible and were, indeed, surrounded by the forests of the Chaco. At least half a dozen men in Rivadavia described to me their visits to see the vestiges of the ship.¹⁵

15. None of them associated this ship with the name *La Salteña*. Some people thought that the remains in Gorriti were those of the *Orán* or the *Sol Argentino*.

In July 2004, Dardo, Luis’s father-in-law, told me how the boiler was removed from the wreckage and added, “The rest of the ship was almost ready to break apart. They tried to take the ship out, but the only thing they rescued was the boiler. When we were kids we got to see the front of the *barquito* [small ship]. They were a bunch of *fierros* [pieces of metal]. They say that those *fierros* were made of bronze. I had the chance to see the ship. You could see it clearly.” Alterio, for his part, remembered, “You could see about six meters of the ship sticking off the ground.”

Ann Stoler (2008) has argued that the study of ruination should focus “not on inert remains but on their vital refiguration” (194). The accounts and practices presented above show that the vestiges of *La Salteña* were for a long time not simply abandoned pieces of metal but potent and vital articulations of a collective history, to the point that parts of the ship were removed from Gorriti and put on display in a public space. By the time the boiler was severed from the rest of the vestiges, the generations of people who had seen them in Gorriti had told friends, relatives, and acquaintances about them and, in doing so, had created imaginaries that would outlive those remains. The memory of the wreck in Gorriti,

in turn, blended with the memory of other people's encounters with the vestiges of the other steamships that had marooned in the Bermejo and that, like those of *La Salteña*, were gradually covered with sediments, vegetation, or water. Only the memory of that debris remains, creating a cartography that historicizes the regional landscape by imagining the detritus of ghostly ships strewn across wide expanses of *monte*. Currently, the boiler on Rivadavia's plaza is the last known vestige of those ships.

Monument to the Ruins of Progress

Many people in Rivadavia know, and shared with me, the story of how the boiler ended up there. In the early 1970s, a local young man who had been enlisted to serve in the military in Tartagal (close to the Bolivian border) told his senior officers about the ship in Gorriti. He was doing what many others had done before him: spreading the story that somewhere near Rivadavia there was "un barco en el monte." But in this case, the officers decided to send trucks, a crane, and soldiers from the Tartagal regiment to remove whatever could be salvaged. This way, they took out not just the boiler but also two small cannons that were on the ship's deck, which de la Serna (1930:149) had mentioned in his 1884 depiction of the remains of *La Salteña*. According to Nicasio, a 90-year-old man I interviewed in 2004, the military wanted to take these objects to Tartagal, but the people of Rivadavia refused and forced the officers to leave them on the plaza. "The boiler had to stay here. And they made it stay. And now it's over there on the plaza." The erection of the monument in Rivadavia realigned local spatial perceptions of the debris of ships, for it implied the removal of the boiler away from the "bunch of *fierros*" in Gorriti and its placement in the most prominent public space in town. Alterio told me that the cannons were also displayed on the plaza for sometime but that they were eventually taken to "a museum in Salta." Notably, those cannons were reminders of the violence that had been part of the navigation schemes. With the cannons removed, the only vestige on display at the plaza was the steam engine that once propelled the ship and hence a seemingly peaceful symbol of the forces of progress that created Rivadavia. And this is a relic that locals considered to belong there, at the center of the place that was almost wiped out by the fall of the narratives embodied by the ships.

Robert Musil (1987) wrote that even though monuments are built to be seen, they are usually ignored by passersby and are "impregnated with something that repels attention" (61). While authors who have examined monuments in different settings tend to agree (Grant 2001:336; Taussig 1999:20–21; Young 1993:13–14), some of them have also argued that this indifference is not complete, that is, that the monuments' presence can in fact, especially in moments of political upheaval, attract expressions of collective energy, as the widespread toppling of communist monuments in eastern Europe clearly shows (Boym 2001:88–89; Taussig 1999:21). It is to

this latent potency of monuments that I want to turn. In Rivadavia, people certainly go about their daily lives largely indifferent to the boiler on the plaza. Yet the boiler's particular history and its peculiar configuration as a monument make locals more aware of it than is usually the case elsewhere in Argentina with monuments that honor distant national heroes, for it is made from the debris of the emblematic symbol of the regional history: ships (fig. 9).

During my fieldwork, I was impressed by how a makeshift monument such as this was a collective magnet in people's spatial and historical sensibilities. Even in rural places or in the other town in the region, La Unión, those alluding to "los barcos" referred almost immediately to "la caldera" on Rivadavia's plaza and asked me whether I had seen it. It was as if that vestige was the region's historical center of gravity, the nodal point that brought disparate locales together, the last thread connecting current generations to that distant past. I often felt that people talked about the boiler as if it were material proof that the stories they had heard from their grandparents were real and not the product of the feverish imagination of a generation hit hard by their town's decline. It was also notable, I felt, that no plaque or signpost accompanied the boiler, as if the latter spoke for itself and did not need the written word to articulate what needed no explanation or could not be fully articulated.

The boiler's silent prominence was also inseparable from its immobility. In his examination of the geopolitical importance of speed, Paul Virilio (2007) argued that for state, capitalist, and military power, "stasis is death" (38). This stasis is probably nowhere more apparent than in the detritus of vehicles that create speed. Unlike ruined buildings or infrastructure, ruined means of transport evoke a negativity tangled with the shattering of their capacity for movement. Camilo Vergara (1995) succinctly captured this dialectic's spatiality when he wrote, in the caption of the photograph of an abandoned train engine sitting on destroyed tracks, "going nowhere" (21). Likewise, the negation of movement evoked by the boiler on the plaza is what most graphically confirms its ruined state. The boiler stands as testimony to the fact that the town of Rivadavia itself is like a massive ship stranded on the ground, far from the river that had inspired its founders and anchored around the immobile debris of its former engine.

James Young (1993) argued that any memorial marker in the landscape "is perceived in the midst of its geography, in some relation to the other landmarks nearby" (7). Similarly, part of the boiler's semantic force results from its entanglement with other landmarks, primarily the old riverbed and the site in Gorriti where the ship that held the boiler is buried. In fact, when locals refer to either one of these sites, they often point to the other two, as if one vestige could not be understood without reference to the others. These places constitute, in this regard, a field of contrasts that draw their force from these sites' incomplete, ruptured nature: a riverbed without a river, a boiler without a ship, a buried ship without a visible presence. The overlapping absences these ruined places



Figure 9. Monument to the ruins of progress (photograph by author).
A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

and objects evoke—the Bermejo, ships, progress—saturate the regional space as well as local memories with phantom presences: a disappeared river and a prosperity that passed by and left behind a trail of debris.

Alois Riegl (1982 [1928]) wrote that one of the features of monuments is “their claim to immortality, to an eternal present and an unceasing state of becoming” (38). This is why monuments that are in ruins are particularly striking, for they highlight the futility of such claims. And this is why the boiler on the plaza in Rivadavia is such a peculiar and contradictory monument. The boiler is the industrial vestige of a wreck, and as such it is a symbol of the fragility of modernity’s products; yet in being taken away from the semiburied pieces of metal in Gorriti and transported to the plaza, it became something else: a monument erected, like all monuments, “for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events . . . alive in the minds of future generations” (Riegl 1982 [1928]:21). This unresolved tension between ruination and claims to posterity is at the core, I believe, of what makes this monument meaningful for local people, for it captures for them both the past glory days of Rivadavia and its subsequent dislocation. The negativity evoked by the boiler, the image of

what this object and what it represents are not, makes this a particularly poignant and historically apt way to commemorate Rivadavia’s past as a monument to the ruins of progress.

Some of the actors who dreamed of turning the Bermejo into a smooth trade route, it is worth noting, fantasized about erecting a monument on its margins to celebrate the triumph of civilization over savagery. In 1852, the noted Argentinean political writer and intellectual Juan Bautista Alberdi wrote a book set to influence the drafting of the national constitution the following year. In it, he hailed the navigation of the Bermejo by steamships as one of the turning points in the making of modern Argentina; he also predicted that a monument would be erected on its margins to celebrate the event:

When the bell of the steamship resonates in these virginal and solitary regions . . . the savage of the Chaco, leaning on the bow of his arrow, will contemplate with sadness the passing of the formidable machine that intimidates him to abandon those margins. Unhappy leftover of the primitive creature: say goodbye to the domains of your ancestors, for Reason now deploys its sacred flags on the country. . . . On the picturesque banks of the Bermejo, one day national

gratitude will erect a monument that will read: "To the 1852 Congress, liberator of those waters: posterity is grateful." (Quoted by Araújo 1884:201)

Writing just before the implementation of the most systematic navigation plans on the Bermejo, Alberdi imagined this river's margins as the most fitting place to erect a monument with a plaque honoring the congress that, in drafting the constitution, would set the stage for the liberation of the Chaco from barbarism. And the ultimate symbol of the power of modernity was the steamship, that "formidable machine" that would, undoubtedly for him, intimidate "the savage" to abandon the river's margins.

Two years later, a steamship entered the Bermejo for the first time, led by Thomas Page. Yet contrary to what Alberdi had anticipated, Page noted that the indigenous people he interacted with seemed indifferent to his ship: "To our astonishment, the steamer seemed to awaken among them neither fear nor curiosity" (1859:249). Like Alberdi, Page had also assumed that the mere sight of industrial machinery propelling a boat would astonish the natives, but the only ones who were astonished were Page and his crew, struck by their steamship's failure to make an impression on primitive people (fig. 10).

In retrospect, those people had good reasons for not being impressed. Less than three decades later, those "formidable

machines" had succumbed to the Bermejo's shifting physical configurations, their broken hulls scattered over the intricate geography of the river. And in the early twenty-first century, the only monument that exists on the shores of the Bermejo's dry riverbed is a plaque-free relic of their ruins. This is why this monument is not free of the irony that Boym associates with reflective nostalgia, nostalgia that while longing for better days does not make grand claims about their truth and is aware, as Boym (2001:50) put it, that home is in ruins.

Conclusions

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991 [1974]) emphasized that space is a ruptured and unstable sociohistorical configuration, "devastated and devastating," homogenizing and constraining "yet at the same time utterly dislocated" (97). In this article, I have tried to show that these spatial dislocations can be brought to light by examining ethnographically as well as historically the social relevance of destroyed objects. Countless places the world over are drenched in debris of progress and are inseparable from it. The district of Rivadavia, in this regard, is just one expression of the scarred landscapes created globally by the expansion of capitalist and state relations in a region of South America

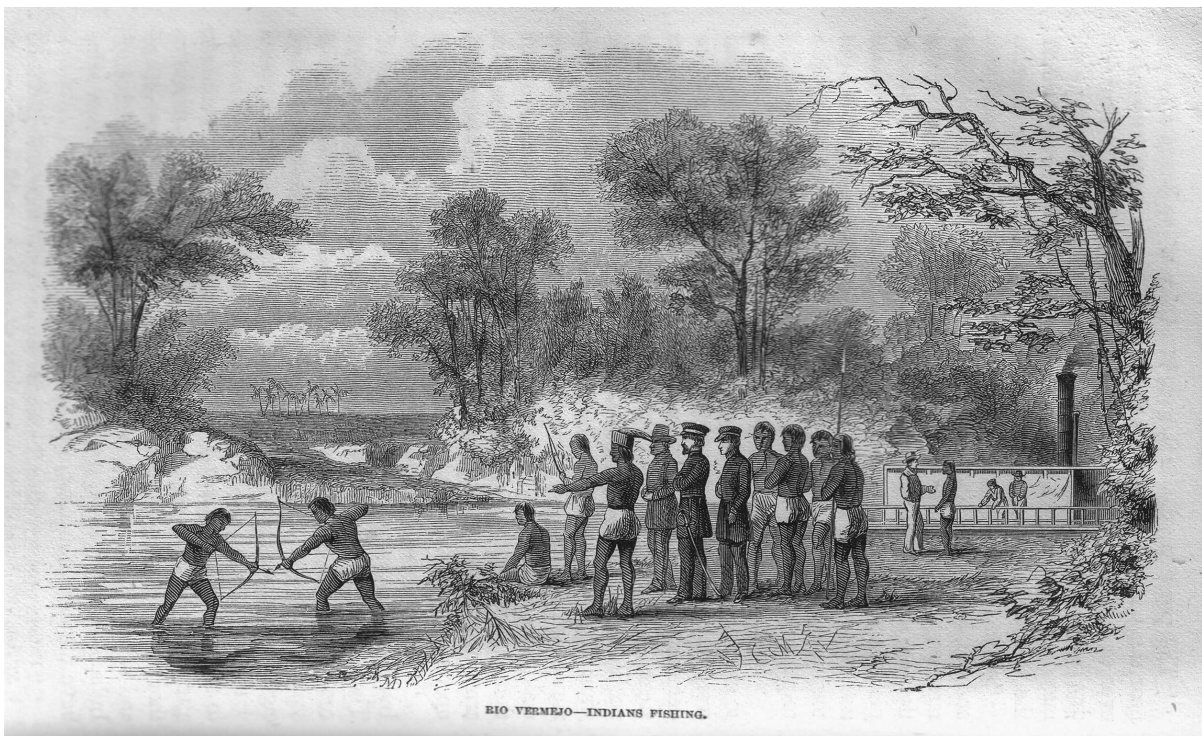


Figure 10. 1854 expedition to the Bermejo, with Page's steamboat in the background. "To our astonishment, the steamer seemed to awaken among them neither fear nor curiosity" (Page 1859:249). A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

that was long seen as the epitome of savagery but that in the second half of the nineteenth century seemed to briefly symbolize the bold project of progress being articulated in Argentina. The failure of this attempt to create a smooth space for the mobility of capital because of the striations of the regional geography reminds us that what we today call “globalization” has never been an aspatial process but, instead, has been an amalgam of profoundly spatial practices that permanently create, in the words of Anna Tsing (2005), friction. Yet while Tsing tackles the localized forms of destruction created by globalization, she does not get to conceptually analyze their spatial implications. I suggest here that this friction can be examined by looking at the debris it leaves behind. Given the particular history of the unraveling of the navigation plans on the Bermejo, I have focused on the remains of ships and the imaginaries woven around them as critical nodes for examining these regional ruptures and the interpenetration of space, history, decline, and subjectivity.

“In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting,” wrote Walter Benjamin (1998 [1928]:177–178). I have explored this physical merging of history into spatial settings with the ultimate aim of highlighting the spatiality of historical processes and the ways in which local people’s interpretations of this sedimentation and its resulting debris reveal important clues about their subjectivity. The meanings that these sites evoke are not univocal, as illustrated by the ways in which criollos and Wichí differ in assessing the ships’ significance: as means of transport that brought wealth or as vehicles for the deployment of violence and domination. Yet these actors evoke a history that they cannot but read through the traces left by the presence of ships on a landscape whose transformations are inseparable from the fate of those ships.

That I have focused on an unsuccessful scheme should certainly not lead to the view that the debris created by capitalism is restricted to instances of failure and decline. As Ann Stoler (2008) has argued, “Imperial projects are themselves processes of ongoing ruination, processes that ‘bring ruin upon,’ exerting material and social force in the present” (195). Likewise, the expansion of capitalist and state relations that accompanied the navigation of the Bermejo brought about unparalleled destruction in indigenous spaces, especially in the brief period when their promoters deemed these schemes a success. This was a success that was proclaimed but that never fully materialized and that was recurrently undermined by the hurdles posed by the river. Yet the contrast between the promise of prosperity embodied by the navigation plans and their outright collapse is politically relevant, in a Benjaminian vein, in that it throws critical light on the ideology of progress and its “illusory dream images” (Buck-Morss 1991:159). And this relevance is apparent today in the face of the agribusinesses that are expelling people from their land, introducing new relations of domination, and disrupting the regional geography—all in the name, once again, of progress.

Ruins and rubble are, like all spatial entities, unfinished products, processes in the making that are subject to further

deterioration and are therefore, in the words of Tim Edensor (2005*b*), “in a fluid state of material becoming” (16). The wrecks created between the 1850s and 1880s on the Bermejo gradually disintegrated as a visible physical presence, even if remains of metal planks are still buried in Gorriti and other recondite areas. But this material erosion has been parallel to the ongoing recreation of a memory of that debris, which means that the remains of those ships are currently as intangible and absent as they are present in local people’s imagination. In addition to the boiler in Rivadavia, this is what remains of them: the social memory of their vestiges.

Referring to the memorials at Auschwitz, James Young (1993) wrote that when historical events cease to unfold, “only the sites remain” (119). With the passing of time, he argued, sites and events become gradually estranged from each other, and “only a deliberate act of memory could reconnect them, reinfuse the sites with a sense of their historical past” (Young 1993:119). Similarly, it could be argued that when the navigation plans on the Bermejo came to an end, only the vestiges of ships remained, and it was through “deliberate acts of memory” that those past events and their debris were linked over several generations. Yet in the experience of Rivadavia’s inhabitants, their memory is not an a posteriori practice that reconnects them with objects that had at some point become separated from their subjectivity, as Young may suggest; rather, memory was from the start constitutive of those spaces. This is apparent today in places devoid of visible traces, such as Gorriti, where an uninformed visitor coming from afar would never guess that the vestiges of a steamship lie underneath the Bermejito. It is nonetheless this absence that makes the memory of that ship all the more relevant for local people. This turns the debris of ships into a spectral presence that in having become part of the subsoil has finally blended history into the setting in the most literal sense. Yet this absence also highlights the physical presence of the last of the ships’ relics, the boiler on Rivadavia’s plaza. More than anywhere else, it is there that local memories coalesce to highlight the most enduring of the phantoms hovering over the region: the prosperity promised by the men who led those ships onto an elusive river that was to become their final resting place.

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sites in the district of Rivadavia *banda sur* (all the names mentioned in the article are pseudonyms). The fieldwork for this project was made possible by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Comments

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Gastón Gordillo's marvelous "Ships Stranded in the Forest" is something of an ethnographic treasure hunt. The trail stretches from the foothills of the Andes to the remote far east of Salta Province, "the very edge of geographical space," down dirt roads and neglected paths. Along the way, numerous informants goad his curiosity with their tales of the steamships left high and dry in the landlocked middle of South America. Some claim that these vessels date from the colonial era and were once loaded with gold destined for Spain. Others tell him of gypsies who have scoured the hulks until only ruins remain.

Such legends conjure an image worthy not only of Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* but also of García Márquez, who tells us early in *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (1998) that José Arcadio Buendía once stumbled across "an enormous Spanish galleon" in the jungle. "Speechless with fascination," the future founder of Macondo notes that "the whole structure seemed to occupy its own space, one of solitude and oblivion." Many years later, when José Arcadio's son comes across this same ship, all that survives is "its burned-out frame in the midst of a field of poppies" (16).

Gordillo's own search seems to reveal even less. Literally at the end of the road, as he finally reaches what remains of the once mighty Bermejo River, "there were no visible traces of anything that could have been part of a ship." The anthropologist's disappointment is palpable: "I was hoping that a few feeble traces would still be visible." Ultimately, in what is another familiar South American narrative of failed quests, he admits that "the semiburied remains . . . eluded me." This is the ruin as the Lacanian "*objet petit a*": the loss that generates desire.

Hence the tenor of the article: ruination here is associated overwhelmingly with loss, dereliction, disappearance, disappointment, phantoms, loneliness, abandonment, nostalgia, negativity, and so on. It is only fitting that even the last physical vestiges of these fabled ships should have crumbled into dust or sunk into the mud. The ruins have themselves been ruined. All that is left is a carefully husbanded absence: "Only the memory of that debris remains."

But is that really all? Remember that in his haste to arrive

at his destination, at least once Gordillo admits that he has missed what should be most evident. On his first visit to the town of Rivadavia, he has to backtrack as he realizes that he "had driven through the town's six streets and reached its eastern edge." Likewise, might ruination not be what we pass in the search for what we believe to be hidden elsewhere? This is the ruin as Poe's purloined letter: what is unexpectedly in plain view.

In Rivadavia, what is in plain view is a ship's boiler, placed firmly in the town's main square, "a 2-meter-long metal structure resembling an engine of sorts." Its solid materiality goes without saying, as if it "spoke for itself and did not need the written word to articulate what needed no explanation." The boiler is solidly and irrefutably real ("Real," Lacan might say) and unphantasmatic. It is "the region's historical center of gravity." Moreover, when Gordillo asks about the ships, everyone points to this artifact: here it is, they appear to be saying; look no further. Yet Gordillo rather dismisses this ruin, seeing it as a failed monument that testifies only to the "futility" of the claim to "an unceasing state of becoming" (Riegl 1982 [1928]:38). The monument's immobility indicates its uselessness: "stasis is death," he quotes Virilio as saying; the fixity of the once mobile boiler summons up "a negativity tangled with the shattering of [its] capacity for movement." But is its very permanence not a sign of life? This part object still works; it is still a machine that draws together all the various elements that make up this otherwise desolate region and sustains them. After all, the real shock is that this long-forgotten town (unlike its onetime neighbor, Villa del Carmen) should have so long outlasted the broken promises of modernization. The slogan "going nowhere" is a testament to its people's endurance. No wonder "elderly people in Rivadavia transmit a sense of resilience not devoid of pride."

To put this another way: ruins are not simply fragments of an absent whole. They are (perhaps more importantly) also surplus, excessive, surprising evidence of what endures despite the odds. Ruination is not just death, loss, and absence; it is vitality, survival, and insistent presence against all expectations. Ruins, provoking the imagination of a García Márquez or the equally creative memories of the Chaco's inhabitants, surprise because they manifest a positivity where there should be nothing but negativity, a presence where there should be absence. Perhaps Gordillo found his treasure after all.

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By analyzing ruins of the conquest of the Gran Chaco as

sociohistorical configurations, Gastón Gordillo's article undertakes the suggestive enterprise of examining the interpenetration of space, history, decline, and subjectivity. Drawing on theories of negativity, the author intertwines phantasmagoric debris of ships and monuments erected to commemorate them with past and present interpretations of assorted past and present agents. The result is a thought-provoking ethnographic and historical account.

As several analyses have shown, the archaeological imagination—entangled with past, nation, and civilization building—has played a major part in the use of magnificent ruins to incarnate a valued (trans)national or local we or romanticized internal others. Thus, one of Gordillo's most telling achievements is focusing on almost invisible hints and humble memorials located in a peripheral region to prove the extent to which peripheralization is not simply a power-laden process but mainly one that is key to center building. Moreover, while magnificent ruins testify to the existence of the past in the present, debris performs the parallel task of signifying and weaving past and present in and through forceful absences—in the case study, that of a progress that for some local people is always about to come. Therefore, approaching "modernist development as a cultural-political project ideologically built on downplaying its capacity for failure and dislocation," Gordillo's study illustrates one of its most paradoxical effects in some local and official memories that seem to assert again and again, "Modernist projects have failed. Long live modernist projects!"

In this regard, for criollo subjectivities forged vis-à-vis narratives of progress, debris mostly evokes, through the nostalgia of towns once promising and now near demise, buried treasures and an indomitable, nowadays ghostly river. Instead, for Wichí memories, debris rather promotes the longing for another chronotope, the one preceding the time when the ships arrived to subdue and transform them into a labor force. But even more interesting, people's current narratives in Rivadavia can also emphasize the town's signs of recovery these days, as evident by the population increase, the novel connection to the regional electric grid, and the construction of a gravel road allowing buses from Orán to come three or four times a week. This is interesting indeed, for as Gordillo shows, many of these recent transformations have been part of a neoliberal wave of progress that goes hand in hand with increasing levels of poverty and inequality as much as new forms of ruination, for example, the environmental degradation caused in the whole region by agribusinesses, the logging of hardwoods, and cattle raising. Still, people with relatives in rural areas (criollos? Wichí? both criollos and Wichí?) are also wary of these reloaded narratives of progress, for the government's promises that sustain them say nothing about the evictions resulting from the concomitant arrival of powerful foreign actors in the region. In sum, it is a truly complex panorama, as could be expected, and yet it is lucidly described.

In terms of theoretical goals, the author aims at coping with "the absolute spatialization of practice" and search for

"traces and sedimentations of past relations and conflicts in space" through the exploration of "the spatial and social legacy of these failed navigation plans." His examination of the social relevance of destroyed objects thus points to "highlighting the spatiality of historical processes and the ways in which local people's interpretations of this sedimentation and its resulting debris reveal important clues about their subjectivity."

Once social memory is stated as a key element of both social-spatial processes and subjectivities, the politics of memory requires a parallel reassessment as well. I assume that Gordillo would agree that memories are not just narratives. I do, however, wonder about the extent to which he considers narratives of current progress a concomitant part of collective memories. For while anthropology depends on gathering and analyzing narratives of different sorts, it is important vis-à-vis subjectivities to render precisely which of them count as collective or social memory. Briefly, hegemonic accounts can be repeated but do not necessarily impinge on the self/selves, either uniformly or as other accounts of direct experience do, although if they are truly hegemonic, it can be expected that they become a reference point in contestation over the past. Processes of public memorialization, of remembering/silencing personal and collective experiences, and of transforming them into more or less stable narratives passed from one generation to the other despite the affective attachment they can produce are related but not in a predictable or necessary way. When subjectivities are the explanatory target and when contested meanings are registered, the relationships among these different processes require further elaboration. Overall, the pending question is about the conditions/relations/contexts that allow even the same actor to communicate to us both romantic views "that the town was indeed a prosperous place" and the perhaps more "deliberate acts of memory" and of interpretation of current conditions that take a different part "in historicizing and denaturalizing that geography."

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In the sparsely populated Gran Chaco, bereft of monuments and with few traces of past human endeavor, the absent presence of the stranded ships Gastón Gordillo so eloquently depicts reverberates across time and space despite their absorption and obliteration by human and nonhuman agencies. These residues of progress and hope in the ramshackle transient settlement of Rivadavia are not crowded out by the cacophony of tales from elsewhere and the endless flows of global information. Here, legends and events of yesteryear linger in the absence of other compelling narratives of identity and history. And in the spare materiality of such a place—

where things slowly decay, are intermittently repaired, or just persist—the enduring signs of the past are not eradicated by the ever new, by urgencies to demolish and build.

This spatial and material specificity should cause us to reflect on the varied conditions under which traces remain, palimpsests accrete, patina emerges, and legends flourish and are embellished. In Rivadavia, the iconic and mythic ships endure as shared, identifiable, and discrete characteristics of place. Elsewhere, however, remnants might be more multiple, overlaying each other. The roads, buildings, pavements, gardens, and parks of industrial British cities are layered with hints and louder signs of history—some obscure, some continuously reiterated in local lore and heritage—that compose a thick “temporal collage” (Lynch 1972). Absences and gaps, residues, obsolete signs, physical remnants left behind with no current function or in states of unfinished disposal, and replacement things that look out of place provide a complex and vague landscape of the past (Edensor 2008). Somewhere else, the past might be more effectively erased by human politics and nonhuman agency or by regeneration, climate, or woodworm.

Moreover, the velocity of flows—of ideas, things, people, and money and the consequent speed of change—are crucial in obliterating or sustaining stories about the past and the security of the fixtures and places around which these narratives are organized. The persistence of vestiges, patina, and residue also depends on the extent to which repair and maintenance regimes continuously erase the traces of yesterday and secure illusions of stability and permanence. Wherever the place, however, “haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (de Certeau 1984:108), for haunting is part of dwelling in place. De Certeau and Giard (1998) further observe that “the debris of shipwrecked histories still today . . . burst forth . . . like slips of the tongue from an unknown, perhaps unconscious, language” (133). All places are haunted, then, producing strangeness and comforting familiarity according to their distinctive material, social, and spatial characteristics.

Gordillo refers to the legendary ship of Hertzog’s *Fitzcarraldo*, revealing how memories of place also draw on scraps of media, the scenographies, actors, sound tracks, and narratives of film and television as well as the prose, poetry, paintings, and photographs that act as indexes of experience, flitting into recall and merging with embodied sensations of place. The intense, blurry recollections of other times and places is also conjured up by the tales grandparents and parents relate and the photographs they have shown us. Contemporary processes of social remembering have been described as increasingly externalized, staged outside the local by the intensified mediatization and commodification of popular sites, myths, and icons. Edgar Reisz argues that Hollywood has “taken narrative possession of our past” (quoted in Morley and Robins 1995:93). However, this negative perspective misrecognizes the fragmentary nature of memory,

the melding of the representational, impressionistic, and sensual in the experience of place.

The evocative depiction of the Gran Chaco’s lost ships chimes with my own experiences in industrial ruins (Edensor 2005b). At the time I was undertaking explorations of derelict sites, I rather self-consciously felt that such a topic was peripheral to academic concerns, a frivolous endeavour underserving of serious scholarship that would garner little attention. But it turned out that far from being a solitary oddity drawn to ruins, I belonged to a multitude of academics, students, artists, urban explorers, and all sorts of fellow enthusiasts. We can, perhaps, speak of a turn to ruins across the social sciences and humanities and in popular culture that is analogous to the craze for romantic ruins in the Victorian era. Why is this so? For sure it has something to do with a disenchantment with modernity and its naive assertions about human progress and civilizational advancement cited by Gordillo. In most places, what was solid did not quite turn to air; it left multiple fragments. This desire for ruins and other traces outside of ordinary urban circulation is also part of a broader trend that is unconcerned with grand narratives and seeks out a past that is personal and contextual; is found in oral, family, local and subaltern histories, marginal spaces, and ghost tours (Holloway 2010); and is fragmentary, ghostly, indeterminate, inarticulate, and undefinable (Edensor 2005a).

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The extraordinary poetic force that runs through Gastón Gordillo’s absorbing piece inevitably calls to mind an episode in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (García Márquez 1998) when a Spanish galleon is discovered stranded deep inside the rainforest, its woody ruin miraculously preserved in the lush environment. In both cases, ships simultaneously represent the abolition of space brought about by modern technologies and the limits of colonial modernity. The main difference between García Márquez’s galleon and the ships of the Bermejo River is that the latter are real.

But how real are they? Their existence becomes more and more ethereal as the text proceeds, until they vanish, leaving the reader with doubt as to whether they existed at all or were just a fiction, another elaborate local mythology supported by scant material traces and colonial propaganda. The end of the article is a masterfully crafted anticlimax, although somewhat disappointing. As an archaeologist pursuing elusive ruins of modernity, I have often experienced this disappointment myself. However, it seems that the scarcity of tangible vestiges in Gordillo’s text has less to do with the ghostly character of modernity’s debris than with anthropology’s approach to ruins. I expected that the ships would not turn up eventually,

as if their irruption would have caused an interruption. The ships had to be absent and their ruins imagined/remembered so that the narrative could work and fit into the genre of ethnography.

Are ruins, then, in ethnographic writing condemned to lead a purely metonymic existence (the boiler standing for the ship standing for modernity's failure) or a dematerialized and distributed one (the tales and memories of Rivadavians)? This metonymic, immaterial, and distributed life is what seems to characterize the approach of anthropology and cultural studies to remnants of the past (e.g., Hell and Schönle 2010). I would say that it is not the debris of modernist projects that is examined here but rather the debris of their memory. It is ironical that while historians and archaeologists are discovering the mystery of manifesting presence (Ghosh 2009), cultural anthropologists are becoming obsessed with absence (Bille, Hastrup, and Sørensen 2010). Admittedly, presence and absence are two sides of the same coin. Maybe it is just a convenient division of labor in which cultural students and anthropologists work with the social representation of what is lost ("the social memory of their vestiges" as Gordillo puts it) and archaeologists with the things in themselves that remain.

However, the article itself casts doubts about epistemic divisions: it is a wonderful hybrid of history, geography, anthropology, and archaeology. I miss perhaps a greater engagement with the latter discipline. By that I mean taking materiality more into account, considering ruins less a metaphor and more a tangible reality, a true actor that exceeds memories and fantasies. As the discipline of things (Olsen 2010), archaeology reminds us that ruins can be extremely solid and reluctant to disappear. Yet there is a lesson for archaeologists here, too. For more than 100 years, our discipline has made others think: without much help from archaeologists, Freud, Simmel, Benjamin, and Foucault found inspiration in archaeology. The same seems to be happening now, and Gordillo proves that a cultural anthropologist can produce a powerful work on ruins on his own. With the current interest in materiality and ruination, it is time for archaeologists to leave the ghetto; some have just said goodbye (Buchli and Lucas 2001; Olivier 2008; Olsen 2010).

My last comment has to do with the concept of monument. Gordillo considers the boiler in Rivadavia as "a monument to the ruins of progress." Although the boundaries between monument and ruin are fuzzy, I prefer to think of them as opposed. Of course, monuments can be rendered subversive and ruins conservative, and ruins can become (a sort of) monument, such as the boiler in Rivadavia's plaza, but in general terms modern ruins are rather difficult to domesticate. They are too uncanny and ambiguous: in fact, they preserve something of the Latin etymology of monument that most monuments have lost: disturbing projective qualities. Ruins announce, warn, and forecast (*monéo* had all these meanings). In the case of the boiler, it announces the end of a colonial enterprise, it is a warning for those tempted to follow its path,

and it forecasts the failure of all dreams of reason. I doubt that there is any purposefully designed monument that can convey this triple message so disturbingly. The power of ruined things lies in their indexical nature, which is inseparable from their materiality. Monuments are symbolic, but ruins are directly part of past events: the past in the present. As ships abolished space, ships' ruins abolish time.

Ruins are potentially subversive. But so can be the work of the scholar who unearths, literally or metaphorically, the debris of modernity. Gastón Gordillo's outstanding text, like the ruins he studies, also announces, warns, and forecasts.

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This essay examines the persistent traces of a "progress" that never materialized. In the forest of Chaco, near the course of the Bermejo River, people talk and remember ships stranded in the forest. The author, curious about these rumors, sets about to investigate the origin of these artifacts and their impact on local memory. In the 1860s, *salteño* entrepreneurs started to navigate in the upper waters of the Bermejo, carrying goods to Rivadavia, then the chief end port of this traffic. In 1872, the course of the river drifted north, causing the town to be disconnected from western Salta and from markets in northern Argentina. Professor Gordillo documents convincingly that explorers, scientists, and travelers to the region saw in the 1870s and 1880s the wrecked ships emerging from the shallow waters of the river. In recent decades, as the material evidence of these wreckages started to disappear, local inhabitants built a monument to commemorate the golden past when their town was connected to a turbulent river carrying precious traffic. Gordillo claims that the ruined ships are "debris of progress" to the extent that the town inhabitants associate the stranded ships with a more prosperous period in the town's history. Memory formation is often made of fictional elements. One of them is the claim that in the past, those ships used to transport gold and other precious metals through the river. The town's disconnection from the Bermejo River produced the out-migration of important members of the community. Hence, the ships stranded in the forest also stand for the depopulation that followed the failure of progress. While earlier nation-builders, such as J. B. Alberdi, presented the establishment of steamship services in northern Argentina as a conquest of barbarism by civilization, later observers pointed to the stagnation and decline of this frontier town and its surroundings.

Ships stranded in the forest open interesting possibilities for the examination of regions that were once touched by the promise of progress and later, disconnected from national and international markets, declined into oblivion. Gordillo calls

this effect “negativity” to the extent that these ruins are contemporary remainders of failed development in the past and, to this extent, moments in the ongoing process of local memory formation in which people relate their present economic malaise to a past construed as “golden.” Local excitement about “progress,” stimulated by the first steamships to navigate the Bermejo River, was prior to the military conquest of the Chaco in 1884. I thought that this aspect needed greater commentary, for the event of the stranded ships seems to pale in the presence of a major historical event that traumatized the lives and experiences of Wichí. To be fair, the author mentions that the Wichí were worried about the arrival of white armed men on board of ships and were not fouled by the illusion of progress. Today, Rivadavia seems a place where Wichí coexist in harmony with their criollo brothers and sisters. But this might not have been the case in the 1870s and was definitely not the case after 1884. Maybe the town was so marginal to the interests of national capital and commerce that the conquest itself left little impact on the region in terms of land grabbing and eviction of indigenous peoples. But this is too important a topic as to be left unexamined.

In this remarkable piece of historical reconstruction, I found myself puzzled by Gordillo’s use of terms. Why assign the name “progress” to something that never materialized? Is it “progress” to see steamships pass by? Although no information is provided, the abrupt drift of the river course probably prevented the arrival of other elements of progress: electric lighting, diesel motors, roads and automobiles, local trading firms, expanding number of farms, schools, newspapers and libraries, municipal regulations about sewage disposal and public hygiene, and new civic associations. Where are these other elements of progress? Are they not constitutive of progress as it was conceived in the late nineteenth century? In my view, Rivadavia never experienced economic progress, mainly because it never had the critical mass of human resources, capital, and technology necessary to start a process of economic growth. In fact, most of the town’s ruminations about a lost golden age are about nonprogress. Still, decades later the region would remain tenuously integrated into the nation. In fact, one could claim that these territories have never been part of the national market because of poor connectivity and prohibitive transportation costs.

The problem of towns that suffer a process of prolonged stagnation or decline as a result of their disconnection to major trade routes is an important historical issue. Yet one case does not help us to understand how local communities cope with stagnation and decline, refashioning local memory. We need multicase studies to detect some regularities in the effects of nonprogress on local memory. Distance to centers of administrative and political decisions and to consumer or reexport markets are still crucial factors in the marginality of a region or locality. The coastal settlements along the Bermejo River seemed to have been of temporary interest to shipping companies and military scientists from Buenos Aires and to landowners and merchants from Salta. But the evanescent

nature of this interest left the whole area unintegrated into the national economy. Did this happen to other small towns alongside the western border of Salta? Was this common to all the Argentine northwest?

Reply

I thank the commentators for their thoughtful observations, which complement each other in manifold ways. Because each set of comments focuses on key themes that run through my article—ruins, negativity, the ethnography of debris, memory, progress, and the current surge in the interest in ruins—I will respond to them individually in order to engage with some of the theoretical and methodological challenges posed by these topics and concepts.

Jon Beasley-Murray proposes a masterful reinterpretation of my analysis based on a Deleuzian emphasis on positivity, excess, and affirmation. Rather than being expressions of negativity, absences, and decay, as I claim, Beasley-Murray suggests that ruins in general and the boiler and the town of Rivadavia in particular are materializations of endurance and vitality. I believe that this interpretation complements rather than contradicts my own analysis. As noted by several authors, an emphasis on negativity does not necessarily contradict philosophies of affirmation such as Deleuze’s, for both share a critique of the abstract formalism of the Hegelian dialectic and of purely logical notions of negation (Coole 2000; Laplantine and Nouss 2007 [2001]). Philosopher Diana Coole (2000) has in fact argued, trying to reconcile Adorno and Deleuze, that negativity can be seen as generativity: a creative-destructive critical force that has affirmative elements.

Drawing on this perspective, I agree with Beasley-Murray’s point that the boiler on the plaza can also be seen as a positive permanence that “is still a machine that draws together all the various elements that make up this otherwise desolate region.” But I do not agree that this affirmative dimension of ruins and debris should take priority over their negative ones, as Beasley-Murray seems to suggest. The boiler “still works” as a spatial magnet but does so as a broken and incomplete artifact, a bundle of negativity that prompts local people to refer to multiple absences: the prosperity of bygone years, invisible ships, a phantom river. A view of ruins as surplus and excess, while conceptually important to highlight their material resilience, could miss that ruins also represent disrupted spaces and absent actors.

Alfredo González-Ruibal argues that as an archaeologist he found the end of the article somewhat disappointing when I revealed that I found no actual ships stranded in the forest. This is a disappointment I initially experienced myself in the field, for I was certainly hoping to find traces of steamships in out-of-the-way areas of the Chaco. But I do not believe, as González-Ruibal suggests, that “the ships had to be absent

and their ruins imagined/remembered so that the narrative could work and fit into the genre of ethnography.” A semi-buried ship was indeed visible not far from Rivadavia for almost a century, until the early 1970s. Had I done my field-work then, I would have incorporated this wreck in my ethnography. My analysis of absent ruins, in short, reflects the current texture of this particular geography rather than an ethnographic approach to ruins writ large. In fact, I have elsewhere examined ethnographically how local actors relate to actual physical ruins in other parts of the region (Gordillo 2009a, 2009b, forthcoming).

Having said this, I do think that the collective evocation of ruins that do not exist anymore has a relevance that goes well beyond my case study or the practice of ethnography. The most famous ruins created in the twenty-first century are those of the World Trade Center in New York City. And those ruins, as we know, were quickly removed from lower Manhattan. But the ongoing memory of these now-intangible ruins continues to guide political actions and controversies, as the recent debate about the plan to construct a Muslim center near this “hallowed ground” illustrates. Despite the obvious differences between the two cases, the memory of the phantom debris of ships in Rivadavia has a social potency that is analogous, in its negativity, to the ghostly evocation of the ruins of the World Trade Center.

Claudia Briones raises the question of the relationship between memory and hegemony in my analysis, and she asks whether it is possible to disentangle hegemonic discourses of progress from local subjectivities. Certainly, the ongoing celebration of progress by state and capitalist actors has influenced how people in Rivadavia remember the town’s past. Yet those memories also have a profoundly local flavor, and people draw on the boiler as monument and the invocation of steamships to imagine a prosperous past as the opposite of a subsequent experience of decline. I conceive of those memories not simply as narratives (as Briones seems to imply that I do) but also as embodied practices grounded in space and material objects. And while I certainly paid considerable attention to what local people told me, a good part of my analysis focuses on the boiler as a material site of commemoration that informed those people’s memories and attitudes.

Ricardo Salvatore objects to my use of the concept of “progress” to allude to a project that proved to be a failure. But he seems to have missed that I draw on Walter Benjamin to see progress as ideology, a collection of “illusory dream images” that in its materialization in space creates social-spatial destruction independent of its relative “success” or “failure” (i.e., irrespective of whether roads, schools, and libraries are also built as a result). When Rivadavia briefly expanded because of the rise of commercial traffic on the river, officials and businessmen saw the navigation of the Bermejo as a success while it was simultaneously wreaking havoc on Wichí groups. A similar devastation is currently taking place with the expansion of agribusinesses in northwest Argentina, another allegedly successful manifestation of progress. One of

the aims of this article, in other words, is to reveal the dislocations created by processes presented as “progress,” and this necessarily means not taking the concept at face value and bringing to the fore other, more politically fruitful concepts such as domination, inequality, and social justice.

In discussing my article, Tim Edensor asks the broader question of why we see today “a turn to ruins” analogous to “the craze for romantic ruins in the Victorian era.” To conclude, I will reflect briefly on this notable historical parallel because I think it runs deeper than the disenchantment with modernity mentioned by Edensor. The anxieties that material vestiges tend to create about the future of capitalist modernity are well known (my article tackles some of them). Yet in the past few centuries, another, more subterranean tradition has viewed ruins not as sources of unease but as sites that signal the finitude of oppression and the promise of social change. And this view usually emerges at times of political upheaval.

In 1791, as revolutions were turning the status quo of France and Haiti into rubble, Constantin Volney argued that tyrants “abhor” ruins, for in confounding “the dust of the king with that of the meanest slave” they announce “the sacred dogma of Equality” (Volney 2005 [1791]:1). And addressing imaginary ruins, de Volney wrote “Hail solitary ruins. . . . What virtues are yours! . . . You punish the powerful oppressor; you wrest from avarice and extortion their ill-gotten gold, and you avenge the feeble whom they have despoiled” (1). Almost a century and a half later, shortly before being killed during the Spanish Civil War, the anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti articulated a similarly political attitude toward ruins that implied that the unease with ruins results from a class experience removed from manual labor. An interviewer told him that even if they defeated fascism, they would inherit “a country in ruins.” He replied, “We have always lived in misery, and we’ll accommodate for a while. . . . But don’t forget that we, the workers . . . are the ones who build cities. Why aren’t we going to build and replace what was destroyed, under even better conditions? We are not afraid of ruins.”¹⁶

Unlike de Volney, Durruti did not celebrate ruins, for he was aware they might also signal destruction and suffering among the dispossessed. Yet the views of these two men complement each other in illuminating ways: the ones who fear ruins the most as emblems of political fragility are usually those in positions of power; those who have nothing to lose are often not afraid of them, for they already live in ruined spaces, and ruins may in fact herald the birth of a better world.

I believe that the current surge in the interest in ruins, like that of two centuries before, articulates this unresolved tension between the apprehensions and the expectations stirred up by processes of rapid global transformation, economic crisis, and political polarization. As places and objects that have been destroyed but still linger in the geographies that

16. http://es.wikiquote.org/wiki/Buenaventura_Durruti (in Spanish).

surround us, ruins and debris announce the failures of the past, the fragility of the present, and the open-endedness of the future. Even in a small and desolate town on the dry bed of the Bermejo River.

—Gastón Gordillo

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