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Cambalache: The tango that predicts the future

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Abstract

Enrique Santos Discépolo was a songwriter in Buenos Aires in 1934 and was asked to produce a tango for a stage performance. The tango he wrote, *Cambalache*, reflected the national crisis in the country of Argentina, which had lost its democracy to dictators in a coup. The fascist leaders then set about destroying the nation's freedom of expression, including eventually the public performance of this tango which spoke of society's falling to pieces because of a lack of morality and mores. But the tango has persisted to be played regularly for nine decades. Why does this tango seem more apropos each year that has passed since those early days of government repression?

Introduction

The most famous published soothsayer was likely Michel de Nostredame (1503-1566), an astrologer who published a book containing 942 quatrain poems that have been interpreted in innumerable ways to foretell future events since its publication in 1555. It continues to move onto best seller lists after major societal upheavals (Barnes and Noble product information). Whether or not the book predicts the future—and as a scientist I am highly skeptical of such assertions—it is subject to constant new translations of the 16th century French and a continuing search for descriptions of places, events, and things that can be shoehorned from present-day languages and cultures into the Nostradamus quatrain language and structure. Such efforts have met with limited success and forgeries are common (Reuters staff, 2020). As Stephene Gerson, a Nostradamus scholar, noted: his “arcane predictions could mean anything.” (op cit.).

There is another poem that seems to predict the future uncannily, but it is a poem set to music. In 1934, the Buenos Aires poet and tango composer, Enrique Santos Discépolo, was asked to write a tango for the movie, *Soul of the Concertina (Alma del Bandoneón)* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C729AY9DQnQ>). The tango he wrote was *Cambalache*, a song that was destined to become a classic in Argentina and elsewhere among tango aficionados (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vH6_jzFlkFg). The tango continues to draw hushed respect for its uncanny ability to remain current. I have witnessed many performances of the tango in Argentina over 50 years of research in the country and have never heard it referred to other than in awe, in phrases similar to, “This tango could have been written this morning.” When Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/summary/>), some people suggested that the award should have gone to Enrique Santos Discépolo, instead, whose tango transcends the centuries.

Cambalache

The name cambalache means a bazaar or junk shop, a messy place where things are tossed together willy-nilly. Although written 88 years ago, the tango, like Nostradamus's quatrains, seems increasingly clairvoyant about the human condition, and has periodically been banned due to censorship of the underlying philosophy of the tango's lyrics. Like the work of Nostradamus, it has been translated and interpreted numerous times. Discépolo recorded the first version in 1935, and that is the version I used for the lyrics, for there are many modifications to his lyrics that have been made by different performers since it was written. *Cambalache* even inspired a tribute tango by the late Spanish film director and protest singer-songwriter, Luis Eduardo Aute (*Siglo XXI*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weAqJ4Tojzs>).

Aute ends his tango by saying that he plagiarized part of it from Bob Dylan and others, but so what? Everyone steals in the 21st century, and we all steal from each other, even from God and the Devil, as noted in *Cambalache*, itself. Aute was only following the master.

Reflecting changing morals and governments

Even more effectively than the French quatrains of Nostradamus, *Cambalache* continually adapts to societal change and reflects the current often deplorable condition of a society (*Clarín*, 2012; *La Gazeta Federal*, 2012), almost acting as a mirror of a society's political and personal peccadillos. Indeed, from a liberal professor's point of view, watching the Trump administration in operation during and after its time in office was like witnessing the *Cambalache* come to life once again, with all of the conmen, swindlers, people with fake degrees, fake universities, and invented accomplishments similar to those listed in the tango (Derysh, 2019). The United States had never before seen the like. Consider the lyrics of one of our most patriotic songs, *You're a Grand Old Flag*, written in 1906 by George M. Cohan, that notes that "Ev'ry heart beats true/Under red, white and blue/Where there's never a boast or brag." Never a boast or brag? The refrains of *Cambalache* turn those ideals on their head.

Some, like Trump himself, even had fake *Time Magazine* covers made, and submitted them as proof of their accomplishments! To someone familiar with *Cambalache*, each day was another line of the song becoming real, words made flesh, with phony credentials extending from the President and First Lady through a host of fellow charlatans on down the line in a presidency termed shambolic (Bolton, 2020); Howlin, 2020), and a circus of mediocrities (Jay Bookman, 2018), among other less-flattering descriptions. The failed coup by the Trump administration highlights the applicability of *Cambalache* to the modern era.

The Fascist right takes over in Argentina

Following its first coup d'état in the nation's history, Argentina installed its first fascist president in 1930, General José Félix Uriburu, a conservative from Salta Province in the far northwest, which was at the time a right-wing bastion. The military were now in charge with a patina of legality supplied by the Supreme Court and the Catholic Church. After two years, Uriburu was replaced by other right-wing presidents who maintained a "conservative restoration" throughout much of the decade. Corruption was rampant and Discépolo wrote his tango to describe the national and provincial governments that were rotten to the core following the loss of democracy. Argentina had swung hard right and the people's voice had been lost, as happens in dictatorships, and Argentina became the first fascist country in South America (Lewis, 2003). Soon repression, torture, and murder appeared as government activities Rodríguez Molas (1985).

Argentina's hard right wing influenced the nation's behavior during WWII. The country was friendly to Mussolini and Hitler and was officially neutral in the global conflict. Indeed, the nation became a refuge for major Nazi war criminals after WWII, with estimates of Nazis seeking refuge permitted to enter the country ranging from hundreds to thousands, and with recently discovered documents showing at least 12,000 Nazis lived in Argentina after WWII (BBC, 2020). Nazis given shelter and anonymity included Adolph Eichmann, Josef Mengele, and Eduard Roschmann, the Butcher of Riga. A corrupt right-wing government, following the message of the *Cambalache*, would be expected to invite the greatest criminals of humanity to receive succor, since nothing mattered anymore, everyone was the same: Nazi or humanitarian were equal. Moreover, there was money and treasure involved. As the tango notes, if you don't steal you're a fool.

The World Today

Cambalache's poetic yet cynical phrases can describe modern authoritarians (e.g., Putin, Orbán, Erdogan, Pinochet, Ortega), failed states (Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, North Korea, Nicaragua, Venezuela), democracies with incompetent or illegal politicians (Mexico, Greece, Brazil, Spain), and societal collapse in general, since a society reflects the mores of its people. In one sense, a society's mores are its collective soul, and as all efforts to maintain decency are lost due to self-centered avarice and greed, democracy's and society's collapse are threatened.

Indeed, it is the loss of societal norms, as enumerated in the *Cambalache*, that makes the tango so prescient. No one escapes from the effects of the loss of true quality, meritorious achievements, well-earned pride in one's successes, and honest accomplishment resulting from hard work. Alas, once those things are gone, as the tango notes, we are all equal in our depravity, greed, narcissism, and sociopathy.

It is not a hopeful tango, to be sure, but it is an accurate reflection of the world today as we witness the collapse of societies, even possibly our own, and the destruction of the planet through greed and selfish behavior by nations and their citizens, collectively and individually. Democracies can be lost, as noted in the words and philosophy of this tango. When our core beliefs have been corrupted, the door to authoritarianism will open and “we are all immersed in the same putrid mud.”

“All are equal, nothing is better. A burro is now equivalent to a great professor.” The Georgia Senate race with Hershel Walker comes to mind. Want a Nobel Prize? Have one made for you. It’s all the same anyway. If you are a doctor, do your medical beliefs include demons mating with women and causing disease? Do not worry about criticism from scientists. You can be the chief medical officer of a great state that thinks your crackpot beliefs are just fine. Many governors and other politicians are unknowingly marching to the philosophy of this tango.

“It no longer matters if you are a righteous person or a traitor/An ignoramus, a genius, a pickpocket, a pompous fool, or a swindler.” Do you believe JFK and JFK Jr. are coming back from the dead to rule alongside Donald Trump? That’s good. Your idiotic beliefs are as valuable to society as those of political or religious scholars. Need a PhD? Why? Degrees do not matter anymore. If you really need one, make it up or buy it from a diploma mill such as Trump University or Beck University, founded by someone on the ultra-right who never went to college (Reynolds. 2017). As the tango notes, “The immoral ones have made us all equal.”

Discépolo was not a prophet, but his tango was prophetic, and he understood the things that drive people to succeed, however that success is measured. Why should his understanding of Argentine politics in the thirties accurately describe the world a century into the future? Because his tango dealt with the humanity’s deadly sins: pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, and sloth. These are not biblical admonishments, but there is a bible in the tango. It is not there for its moral influence, as one might guess, rather it is hanging in a toilet pierced by a metal hook, its pages waiting to be used as toilet paper.

The tango remains beloved by Argentines. I once paid for a tango orchestra to play the tango at the intersection of the great pedestrian open air walkways (a million visitors each day) in the downtown Microcentro of Buenos Aires: Calle Florida and Calle Lavalle. When they began playing the tango, there were only a few people standing near me. Most were going about their business. As the familiar classic tango music filled the air, pedestrians came from every side street and business to encircle the musicians in the small tango band. Within a few minutes several hundred people were singing the *Cambalache*. When the song ended someone shouted, “That should be the national hymn of Argentina!” Indeed, it could be the national hymn of many countries.

There is enough material in this tango and its place in politico/musical history for scholars of all types to study. Are there other musical pieces in other countries that have transcended time and culture to apply globally? Certainly Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan have contributed numerous songs to the American protest music canon. Early protest musicians are included in Lomax (1975), and the many music collections of the early musicologist. Philosophers, political scientists, musicologists, poets, Latin Americanists, historians, language experts, religious scholars, Argentine specialists, and psychologists should dedicate some research time to Enrique Santos Discépolo and his tango, *Cambalache*. And they had better hurry because true scholarship is losing its meaning and we are not far from our get together with that burro in the hot oven of history.

The song’s original lyrics

Cambalache (Lyrics and music by Enrique Santos Discépolo, lyrics from Discépolo’s 1935 recording of *Cambalache*; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vH6_jzFlkFg).

Que el mundo fue y será una porquería, ya lo sé

En el 506 y en el 2000 también

Que siempre ha habido chorros, maquiavelos y estafa'os

Contentos y amarga'os, valores y dublé

Pero que el siglo 20 es un despliegue

De maldad insolente, ya no hay quien lo niegue

*Vivimos revolca'os en un merengue
Y, en un mismo lodo, todos manosea'os*

*Hoy resulta que es lo mismo ser derecho que traidor
Ignorante, sabio, chorro, generoso, estafador
Todo es igual, nada es mejor
Lo mismo un burro que un gran profesor*

*No hay aplaza'os, ni escalafón
Los inmorales nos han iguala'o
Si uno vive en la impostura y otro roba en su ambición
Da lo mismo que si es cura, colchonero, rey de bastos, caradura o polizón*

*¡Pero qué falta de respeto, qué atropello a la razón!
Cualquiera es un señor, cualquiera es un ladrón
Mezcla'o con Stavisky, va Don Bosco y La Mignon,
Don Chicho y Napoleón, Carnera y San Martín*

*Igual que en la vidriera irrespetuosa
De los cambalaches se ha mezcla'o la vida
Y herida por un sable sin remache
Ves llorar la Biblia contra un calefón*

*Siglo veinte, cambalache problemático y febril
Que no llora no mama y el que no afana es un gil
Dale nomás, dale que va
Que allá en el horno nos vamo' a encontrar*

*No pienses más, sentate a un la'o
Que a nadie importa si naciste honra'o
Es lo mismo el que labura
Noche y día como un buey*

*Que el que vive de los otros
Que el que mata, que el que cura
O está fuera de la ley*

The song's translated lyrics

Cambalache (Translated by M. A. Mares ©; Another excellent translation is here: <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/cambalache-junk-shop.html-1>)

I know the world was and will always be vile filth
In the year five hundred and six and in the year two thousand as well

There have always been thieves, traitors and common
happy and bitter people, treasures and cheap imitations

But the twentieth century is such a display of insolent malice
nobody can deny it anymore
We live sunk in a meringue of garbage
and are all immersed in the same putrid mud

It no longer matters if you are a righteous person or a traitor
An ignoramus, a genius, a pickpocket, a pompous fool, or a swindler
All are equal, nothing is better
A burro is now equivalent to a great professor

There are no longer failing grades or merit evaluations
The immoral ones have caught up with us
If one person lives as a poseur and another steals for ambition
It is all the same, whether he's a priest, a layabout, the king of wands, a shameless bum, or a vagabond
What a lack of respect, what a trampling of reason
Everyone is a gentleman now, everyone is a thief

Mixed in with Stavisky, you have Don Bosco and La Mignon, don Chicho and Napoleon,
Carnera and San Martin

Just as in the insolent display window
of the bazaar, all of life has been intermingled
And pierced by a metal hook waiting for the toilet
the pages of a Bible weep next to a water heater

Problematic Twentieth Century, you feverish bazaar
If you don't cry you don't suckle
and if you don't steal you're a fool

Keep it up, you can get away with it now
But someday we will all reunite in the fires of hell
Don't worry about it anymore
sit down and observe the world's mess

No one cares if you were to the manor born
Today someone who works night and day like an ox
has the same value as a person who scams people,
who is a murderer, or a healer, or lives outside the law

Notes: Alexandre Stavisky was a French conman who laundered enormous funds through a pawnshop, a cambalache. Don Bosco is a canonized priest and scholar who lived in Italy in the mid-1800s. La Mignon is a character from an opera and represents a prostitute in the tango. Don Chicho is Juan Galiffi, considered the Al Capone of Argentina. Primo Carnera was Italian and world heavyweight boxing champion in 1933-34, the year the tango was written. José de San Martín is the George Washington of Argentina, the great liberator and father of independence.

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Fig. 1. Enrique Santos Discépolo, Photo by Annemarie Heinrich, 1940 (Wiki-Commons, public domain).

