Changing Cultures in Latin America

VILLA Seminar, September 2008

Inventing Argentina: Immigration as a Determining Factor in the Shaping of our Culture

By Dr. C. Miranda
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- Argentina often described as *un crisol de razas* a ‘melting pot of races’.
- As a modern nation, Argentina thrives with second big wave of immigration.

Port of Buenos Aires, 1912

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- *Radiografía de la Pampa* (1933), Ezequiel Martínez Estrada: Buenos = ‘la cabeza de Goliat’ [the head of Goliath].
- Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo* (1845): ‘el mal que aqueja a la Argentina es la extensión’ ['Argentina’s affliction is its size'].
- Historically, left and right-wing politicians saw Argentina as an under-populated country.
- Some based theories of under-population on calculation of potential productivity of fertile lands.
- Miscalculation is at the heart of these debates (cattle ranching and farming demanded fewer workers than the population of Argentina could provide).
Martín Sagrera: lack of correlation between land production and population determined distribution of inhabitants in Argentina.

Promoting rural population levels failed; urban population increased.

Buenos Aires: 27% of total urban population in 1869; 37% in 1895; 53 per cent in 1914.

1853 constitution promotes immigration (assured economic security of all men physically able and wishing to work the land).
1990s Argentine ‘new, upper working/ lower middle class’ mainly made up of immigrants.


First exercised in 1916; Hipólito Yrigoyen elected president.


Twice President Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916-22, 1928-30)
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- 1900s Argentina: consolidation of the lower-middle and middle class.
- ‘New’ social class became ‘the best clientele of a culture they contributed to create.’ (Vázquez-Rial, 1996, p. 52)
- Ethnographic phenomenon triggered great social, economic and physical mobility;
- physiognomy of the capital city redrawn.

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Lower-middle class: *casa chorizo* ["sausage house"] (succession of rooms and patios in the manner of a string of sausages).

*Casa chorizo* in San Telmo, Buenos Aires

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Conventillos in La Boca (1900 and now)

- 1895: 38,000 inhabitants, 17,000 Arg., 14,000 Italians (mainly from Genoa), 2,500 Spanish; the rest of various nationalities.
- Residents of La Boca called Xeneizes ("zeneixi" Genovese in dialect)

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Cultural heteroglossia affected language, literature and journalism.

- 1900s Argentina is characterised by the rise of new readership.
- *Caras y Caretas* (late 1890s) updated and modernised themselves to meet popular demand (Sarlo, 1996, p. 191)
- *Crítica* and *El Mundo* newspapers (1913 and 1927), cinema and theatre reflect mixed readership comprising old *criollos*, immigrants and first-generation Argentines of foreign parents.
- Two-fold cultural reaction:
  - constructed image- Borges’ ‘El Sur’ (1944); ‘*criollos viejos*’
  - bohemian exploration *cultura obrera* (i.e. working-class culture), poor neighbourhood, port, prostitutes mixed races.

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- Argentine lettres are a typical product of this cultural negotiation
- Borges-Arlt dichotomy representing Florida and Boedo groups respectively.
- Roberto Arlt (1900-1942) Aguafuertes porteñas, El Mundo newspaper (from 1928).

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• **Cocoliche** hybrid- Italian dialects and approximative Spanish; spoken by immigrants.

• **Lunfardo**: cocktail of foreign languages: *laburar* and *cháchara* (‘to work’ and ‘gossip’, Italian), *morafar* (‘to eat’, French), *calote* (‘swindle’, Galician) or *gayola* (‘cage’–‘jail’, Portuguese).

• Incorporates a rhyming game: *tango-gotán, café-feca, cajón-jonca, pagar-garpar, mujer-jermu*, etc.

• Heavily used in Tango lyrics (theatre and literature also).

Musician and composer Enrique Santos Discépolo (1901-1951) and Carlos Gardel (1887?-1935)

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Lunfardo expressions entered popular language.

- Now integral part of River Plate Spanish (Uruguay-Arg.).
- Recognition Real Academia Española (Spanish Royal Academy of Letters).
- Academia Porteña del Lunfardo (founded in 1962).

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Argentina is a true *crisol de razas* a ‘melting pot of races’ where native people, immigrants and their descendants have contributed to the shaping of the cultural, literary, institutional and linguistic identity of very rich and diverse country.