

# POPULATION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN ARGENTINA

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- BUENOS AIRES: 400 YEARS.* Edited by STANLEY R. ROSS and THOMAS F. MCGANN. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982. Pp. 192. \$20.00.)
- MOBILITY AND INTEGRATION IN URBAN ARGENTINA: CORDOBA IN THE LIBERAL ERA.* By MARK D. SZUCHMAN. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980. Pp. 236. \$19.95.)
- WORKERS FROM THE NORTH: PLANTATIONS, BOLIVIAN LABOR, AND THE CITY IN NORTHWEST ARGENTINA.* By SCOTT WHITEFORD. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. Pp. 189. \$35.00.)

Argentina's curvilinear pattern of economic and social evolution—development following the depression of the 1870s until the 1940s, and stagnation from the 1950s onward—illustrates a basic fact: the division of the world economy into center and periphery is too simple to account for empirical variability because there are different kinds of peripheries.

During the period of expansion and until the depression of the 1930s, Argentina approached what Adam Smith, de Tocqueville, and Marx called "colonies," or what twentieth-century economists have called "lands of recent settlement." Such countries have a high ratio of land to labor and a labor shortage (examples are Canada and Australia). These societies tended to develop exclusively on the basis of capitalist relations of production. Their export economies have had high rates of growth and have allowed for considerable diversification. These peripheral societies attracted large-scale European immigration, and their populations have attained standards of living comparable to those in the core.

Argentina approached this category in the period of "externally led growth," when it was incorporated into the world economy as a major exporter of grains and beef and an informal member of the British empire. The country's economy grew and diversified (the notion that industrialization began after the depression is a myth), attracting more European immigrants than the United States in proportion to its population; and the Argentines, lower classes included, enjoyed stan-

dards of living comparable to or higher than those in Southern Europe at the time. But Argentina differed from the “lands of recent settlement” in at least two respects: first, although the ratio of land to labor ratio was high, land in the areas of export agriculture already had been appropriated by a landed elite when the immigrants arrived; and second, the dynamic consequences of the linkage to the world economy were concentrated in the coastal region, the “littoral,” where most of the population lived. The expansion of export agriculture, industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and relatively high standards of living together transformed the littoral, but the interior (the traditional Northwest in particular) became an internal periphery.

Since the 1950s, Argentina has shifted developmental paths. It has gradually taken on the characteristics of the more common kind of periphery, the one usually called an “underdeveloped society,” which is characterized by a high level of structural heterogeneity and a labor surplus (as in Mexico and Brazil), and whose potential for economic and social development is lower than that of the lands of recent settlement. Industrialization in the postwar period was based on radical import substitution policies. Committing a large proportion of the country’s capital and labor to noncompetitive activities led to very low growth rates. Since the 1950s, periods of growth have alternated cyclically with periods of stagnation and retrogression. The informal sector has grown, both in the littoral and in the interior. Marginalization processes have become more intense in the 1970s and 1980s as a consequence of pseudo-free-market policies, which have led to deindustrialization. Standards of living gradually have fallen, in both absolute and relative terms. In this respect, Argentina now lags well behind Southern Europe and is approaching more typical Latin American levels. As a result, it has become a country with net out-migration.

The books under review here focus on different aspects of the evolution of the Argentine social structure. The volume edited by Stanley Ross and Thomas McGann discusses the history of the city of Buenos Aires, the core of the littoral and the economic and political center of the country. Mark Szuchman’s book deals with social mobility and the integration of immigrants in Córdoba, a major city of the interior, during the period of externally led growth. Scott Whiteford’s monograph focuses on the labor reserve in the Northwest, the most underdeveloped area of the Argentine periphery, in the early 1970s—that is, during the period of economic decline.

*Buenos Aires: 400 Years*, the collection of essays edited by Ross and McGann, commemorates the city’s four centuries. I will focus on the papers dealing with the economic and social history of the city. These essays discuss the changing position of Argentina in the world economy and the changing characteristics of the city’s social structure.

Jonathan Brown's contribution is entitled "Outpost to Entrepôt: Trade and Commerce at Colonial Buenos Aires." Through the port of Buenos Aires, foreign goods, persons, and ideas entered Argentina. The city had been part of the world economy since the seventeenth century. Initially, it exported mainly silver from the Potosí mines but gradually began to sell agrarian products from the littoral region: hides and, later, salted meats. When the Potosí mines played out, Buenos Aires concentrated exclusively on exporting these littoral products. Through Buenos Aires, textiles and other European commodities (as well as African slaves) entered Argentina in the colonial period. From the beginning, local merchants challenged the Spanish monopoly and traded first with the Portuguese, later with the Dutch, and toward the end of the colonial period, with the English. Brown shows how the expansion of trade led to the growth of the city and to changes in its social structure. Merchants were the dominant elite, richer and more powerful than the cattlemen. The movement toward independence developed among the merchant faction because this group wanted stronger links between Buenos Aires and the world economy and was opposed by the faction integrated with Spain. After independence, when agrarian goods became the most important exports, the big landowners of Buenos Aires province became the ruling elite, but continuity existed in the ruling class, for many of the landowners were the sons of rich merchant colonial families.

Susan M. Socolow's "Buenos Aires at the Time of Independence" discusses the population and social structure of Buenos Aires in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The most interesting part of her analysis deals with the relationship between ethnicity and social class. Before the population transplant at the end of the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of Buenos Aires resembled those of other cities in the Spanish empire: a majority were classified as "white," although foreign travelers considered only about a fifth to be Caucasian, and a quarter to a third were classified black or mulatto. As could be expected, a high correlation existed between class and ethnicity, with blacks and mulattoes overrepresented among servants but also among artisans.

The effect of independence (and the subsequent limited emancipation) among these nonwhites was complex. Apparently, their numbers grew (a mystery, given their overrepresentation among soldiers in the wars of independence), and their position in the economy deteriorated. After independence the artisan stratum whitened, and blacks and mulattoes filled the ranks of the unskilled. Why independence, economic expansion, and emancipation would result in downward mobility for blacks is not clear (and neither is their disappearance, later in the nineteenth century).

James Scobie's "The Argentine Capital in the Nineteenth Cen-

ture" differs from the other essays in being analytical rather than descriptive. The essay focuses on the question of why Buenos Aires, rather than any other city in Argentina, became the economic and political center of the country. The disparate regions that made up the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata could well have split into several small states. Scobie reasons that neither the structure of the Viceroyalty nor the world economy predetermined the coalescence of these regions into a nation-state or guaranteed the hegemony of Buenos Aires.

To answer the question, Scobie proposes to look at three crucial periods in the nineteenth century: the 1810s (the wars of independence), the 1830s and 1840s (the Rosas regime), and the 1860s and 1870s (the institutionalization of the country). He argues that the expansion of Buenos Aires in the first decade of independence was determined by economics, not politics. Under Rosas, on the contrary, political factors were paramount. Rosas could make Buenos Aires the national capital and strengthen ties with England because unlike liberals such as Rivadavia, he embodied the traditional values that prevailed in the interior. Rosas the reactionary accomplished what the bourgeois revolutionaries could not do because of the unviability of their radical ideology.

Scobie's analysis of the 1860s and the 1870s focuses on factors that allowed Buenos Aires to become the hegemonic city when the country turned into a major exporter of beef and grains and a major importer of European immigrants, capital, and manufactures. None of these factors is unexpected or counterintuitive, but Scobie's ability to synthesize a major historical process in a series of propositions is nevertheless impressive. The five factors he cites are: first, the city's capturing the transportation and communication networks built in this period; second, the concentration in the port of Buenos Aires of the surplus generated by export agriculture throughout Argentina; third, the establishment of a domestic and international structure of dependency, in which Buenos Aires was the crucial link connecting foreign and internal markets (and therefore the transmission belt for the expansion of the export economy in the littoral and for the destruction of local handicrafts in the interior as a consequence of the penetration of European manufactures); fourth, the gradual diffusion in the provinces of "modern" ideas generated in or imported by Buenos Aires; and fifth, the political centralization of the country under the control of the state located in Buenos Aires.

My impression is that Scobie is dealing with a broader question than the reasons for the hegemony of Buenos Aires: what were the domestic determinants of Argentina's great transformation, of its conversion into a country resembling the "lands of recent settlement"? The industrialization of Europe and the expansion of capitalist social rela-

tions throughout the world were major determinants of Argentina's entering the English orbit, but internal factors were also operating on the Argentine side. At the same time that "externally led" growth began, a domestic process of accelerated penetration of the society by the state was occurring, and this state happened to be (for historical reasons) under the control of the agrarian elite of the province (and city) of Buenos Aires, the same elite that stood to profit immensely from the conversion of Argentina into a major exporter of labor-extensive agricultural products. Both external and internal factors thus interacted to produce the linkage with England.

Finally, Richard Walter's "The Socioeconomic Growth of Buenos Aires in the Twentieth Century" discusses changes in the population and occupational structure of Buenos Aires. The topic is familiar, but Walter provides a useful compendium of information scattered in different censuses and secondary sources. The population of the city doubled to three million in the first half of the century, and the urban area quadrupled, from two to eight million inhabitants, between 1914 and 1970. Walter documents the impact of immigration before the depression of the 1930s and the intense social mobility in the first half of the century.

In 1914 one-fifth of the inhabitants of the country lived in the city, and about half its population was foreign-born (the native half, it should be remembered, included the Argentine children of the immigrants who had arrived during the previous four decades). In order to understand the impact of immigration, two facts must be kept in mind. First, Argentina not only had a higher rate of newcomers than did the United States, but these immigrants were concentrated in a relatively small area of the country. Second, unlike the English dominions, Argentina received immigrants who originated mostly in countries other than the original metropolis because only one-third came from Spain.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Buenos Aires was a blue-collar city, and most of its blue-collar workers were foreign-born. So were most Porteño white-collar employees, merchants, and industrialists. In the 1930s and 1940s, industry expanded and European immigration declined sharply. The population of the city changed, as creole immigrants from the interior moved to Buenos Aires and its suburbs in search of jobs in the growing manufacturing sector. These migrants were not only taking the new jobs but replacing much of the first- and second-generation European working class, which was joining the rapidly expanding middle class.

Because of migration and reproduction, Buenos Aires turned into a city of Argentines. As an effect of social mobility and later of the stagnation of manufacturing, the blue-collar city became a predomi-

nantly white-collar city. Finally, Buenos Aires and its urban area began to exhibit some of the traits of underdevelopment, as the informal sector grew. This growth resulted from two processes: first, the marginalization of individuals previously incorporated into the “formal” sector, due to industrial layoffs and closings; and second, the inability of a stagnated economy to absorb the labor power of the continuing migrant flow and of the new generations entering the labor market.

Mark Szuchman’s *Mobility and Integration in Urban Argentina: Córdoba in the Liberal Era* deals with another scenario: Córdoba, the most important city of the interior, during 1860–1914, the period of the great transformation. He focuses on the two issues of opportunities for social mobility and the assimilation of immigrants. This work is a pioneer study because it uses a variety of primary sources and focuses on a different locale, unlike most works on these issues, which are based on census data and deal with the littoral.

To ascertain the extent of social mobility, Szuchman took a sample among some fifteen hundred inhabitants of Córdoba. Extracting the sample from the 1869 census returns, he systematically followed the individuals’ careers through church and municipal archives, notarial records, judicial proceedings, university enrollment records, city directories, and electoral rolls. From all these data, Szuchman concludes that rates of social mobility within Córdoba, for both Creoles and immigrants, were low. He plausibly assumes that the high rate of attrition in the records indicates a high rate of out-migration. Based on what is known about Argentina in the period, it is not surprising that inhabitants of Córdoba would emigrate to the more dynamic areas of the littoral. Szuchman, however, believes that this finding contradicts the conventional view, an opinion that will be addressed shortly.

The study of the integration of immigrants is based on two data sets. The first is a sample of more than nine hundred members of the French and Spanish voluntary associations in the city. Szuchman also utilized minutes of meetings and other association documents. The records of the Italian association were not available, a regrettable situation because Italians comprised the largest immigrant contingent in the country as a whole—about half of the total, and their integration in the city of Buenos Aires has been studied. The second data set is a sample of marriage records. Szuchman analyzed some six hundred marriages in which the men were not natives of the city of Córdoba. The study of voluntary associations leads him to the conclusion, already expounded by Germani, that these organizations had an important integrative function. The marriage data show high rates of endogamy, especially by Argentine men, who apparently avoided marrying immigrant women. This finding is an interesting one, but Szuchman derives a major con-

clusion from it: in his view, these data also contradict what he considers to be the prevailing interpretation of Argentine society of the period—the idea that the country was a “melting pot.”

*Mobility and Integration* contains interesting observations. The use of multiple records allows Szuchman to reconstruct the biographies of individuals in different social classes. This approach leads to some very interesting findings: for instance, upward occupational mobility was often not accompanied by higher income or greater wealth; also, census takers frequently applied occupational categories inaccurately, as when classifying manual workers as “industrialists.” If anyone needed convincing that aggregate data must be supplemented with individual data, this study supplies ample evidence.

There are also some flaws. One instance is a clear non sequitur (pp. 74–75). After having expounded what he considers the standard theory on the degree of mobility and the assimilation of immigrants in Argentina in the period, Szuchman states that the theory has two problems: first, it assumes that dissatisfaction with industrialization was a determinant of the “rational impulse for emigration” among individual European workers; and second, it neglects the evidence on the role of communities and collective group mentalities in allaying these workers’ frustration. Frankly, I fail to see why a theory concerned with mobility and assimilation of immigrants in the receiving country would have to make such an assumption, or why it would be invalidated by evidence referring to the sources of the decision to emigrate and to the role of community in the country of origin. Similarly, after finding that the members of the Spanish voluntary association (most of whom were in nonmanual, professional, and skilled jobs) participated little in the affairs of the organization, Szuchman quotes Sebrelli’s questionable statement that apathy, along with optimistic voluntarism, is an intrinsic trait of the petty bourgeoisie (pp. 110–11). If the issue under analysis is the failure of the members of the Spanish association in Córdoba to attend meetings, many plausible hypotheses should be examined before concluding that low participation is in the nature of the petty bourgeoisie.

My central objection to Szuchman’s analysis is his repeated contention that his findings disconfirm what he calls the conventional or traditional interpretation of Argentine social development in the period. This interpretation, which he mainly ascribes to Germani and his disciples as well as to scholars such as Romero, would consist of the two propositions noted above: that rates of mobility were very high at the time of the great transformation and that immigrants blended easily with natives in a “melting pot.” Because his data do not support these propositions for the case of Córdoba, Szuchman concludes that the validity of the theory is called into question.

There are two problems with this view. The first is that he de-

scribes this interpretation in a hyperbolic manner. I do not recall Germani or the others depicting Argentina during the great transformation as a country where immigrants were “overwhelmingly” successful everywhere (p. 73), as an “ethnic monolith” (p. 156), or as a “vacuum” in which immigrants “floated freely until all mixed” (p. 169). Their conclusions with respect to the littoral were, nevertheless, those that Szuchman attributes to them: in that region, where the immigrants were concentrated and where rapid agrarian expansion, industrialization, and urbanization were taking place, rates of mobility were high, and the large ethnic communities, such as the Italians and the Spaniards, were in the process of amalgamating with each other and with the Argentine minority living in their midst. In this connection, I do not recall any proponent of the “traditional interpretation” writing or implying that this assimilation occurred instantaneously or that it took place at the same time and with the same speed in all areas of the country.

This objection raises the second, and most fundamental, problem. The changes described above were taking place mainly in the littoral. Because most Argentines and most immigrants lived in that region, aggregate data for the country reflect these processes. But the distinction between the littoral and the interior, the central dichotomy in Argentine history, was always explicitly taken into consideration by Germani, Romero, and the other scholars named by Szuchman. Therefore, the fact that mobility and assimilation were low in Córdoba, a very important city of the interior but not part of the most dynamic core, does not contradict the established interpretation in any way. It may even be argued that these findings actually strengthen the “traditional interpretation” by showing how much Córdoba differed from the core.

Scott Whiteford's *Workers from the North: Plantations, Bolivian Labor, and City in Northwest Argentina* studies the Bolivian rural workers who migrate to Salta, in the Argentine Northwest, to participate in the sugar harvest. This region, which comprised a tenth of the Argentine population when the study was made (1970), is an area of old settlement, the only one in Argentina with a considerable sedentary Indian population during the colonial period. After independence, the Northwest developed the characteristics of a typical underdeveloped periphery: an agrarian economy based on the latifundio-minifundio complex, specializing in sugar and other tropical crops, and having a considerable surplus of labor. This region was the least touched by the growth that transformed the littoral. Not only did it fail to develop export agriculture or to attract large-scale European immigration, but it also suffered the negative consequences of the opening of interior markets to European manufactures, which displaced local production.

The sugar industry still constitutes the major economic activity of the Northwest. In Salta sugarcane is cultivated in large plantations

owned by the mills, and most seasonal labor is imported from Bolivia. Whiteford's ethnographic study of these migrants and their families describes the patterns of recruitment in Bolivian villages, the role of recruiters (*contratistas*), work and living conditions on the plantations, the workers' community, and their uneasy relationship with the union.

The most interesting section focuses on the workers' activities after the harvest. Seasonal laborers have four alternatives once the work season is over in the sugar fields: going back to subsistence agriculture in Bolivia (the "rural semiproletarian pattern"), working in other harvests or at temporary rural jobs in Argentina (the "rural mobile proletarian pattern"), holding recurrent short-term jobs on Argentine farms (the "rural-shuttle proletarian pattern"), or migrating to the cities of Salta or Jujuy (the "rural-urban proletarian pattern"). As Whiteford points out, these strategies represent different faces of the labor reserve.

Whiteford chose to focus on the workers who migrate to Salta. Most families prefer rural alternatives, so for them the city is the option of last resort. Their foremost goal is security, with upward mobility being a secondary concern. They follow what Whiteford calls a "strategy of least vulnerability": once in the city, they employ several strategies simultaneously, such as using patron-client relationships and friendship networks, developing small-scale entrepreneurial activities, holding multiple jobs (for men, usually in construction or unskilled services), having as many family members working as possible, and gardening or raising animals in city plots. They also endeavor, whenever possible, to keep in touch with their kin in Bolivia and to maintain their small landholdings back in the village.

Some of these migrants eventually adapt to the city and do not return to the sugar harvest. These individuals are not only the most successful workers (usually the ones with marketable skills, such as carpenters and mechanics) but also the laborers who must forego working in the sugar fields because of age or health, often the most marginal migrants to the city. Whiteford stresses the importance of friendship networks, which are in fact networks of reciprocal exchange. His central proposition is that urban adaptation is a function of two factors: the migrants' skill and resources, and their human capital (ability to use networks).

*Workers from the North* is an important book because it describes, albeit in the most traditional periphery of Argentina, how the informal sector is constituted as well as some of the mechanisms by which this sector is linked to the formal, or "standard capitalist," sector. With underdevelopment intensifying in Argentina, the informal sector is growing also in the core region, the littoral. But most of the informal sector in the littoral is urban in origin, produced by industrial decline and the

marginalization of the middle class. In both areas of Argentina, the picture is similar: the proportion of the labor force participating in stable wage relations tends to decline, while the proportion self-employed at low levels of productivity, participating in short-term or unstable wage relations, is growing.