

Points of Observation  
— Buenos Aires 1920



Buenos Aires 1930: Prosperity, diversity  
and social mix in the „París de Sudamérica”

Each European who comes to our shores brings us more civilization in his ways of living, which he will then pass on to our people, than many philosophical tomes

Juan Bautista Alberdi (1853)

The history of Buenos Aires is written in its telephone directory. Pompey Romanov, Emilio Rommel, Crespina D.Z. de Rose, Ladislao Radziwill, and Elizabeth Marta Callman de Rothschild – five names taken at random from among the R's – told a story of exile, desolation, disillusion, and anxiety behind lace curtains.

Bruce Chatwin, In Patagonia (1977)

And I grew up on tangos  
cause tango is brave, cause tango is strong  
it smells of life, it tastes of death

Celedonio Esteban Flores, Por qué canto así (1933)

Malena sings the tango like no other and in each verse she puts her heart. Her voice perfumed with the shrub of the suburb. Malena has the sorrow of the bandoneón.

Homero Manzi, Malena (1942)

Representative Avenidas lined with classicist facades, crowded streets, sleek limousines stuck in traffic, a babel of languages and a melting pot of nations; bourgeois gentlemen and ladies of the gentry jostling with artisans, shoe-shine boys, tango-dancers, prostitutes and pickpockets; prosperity and culture, Carlos Gardel und Victoria Ocampo, and an unceasing stream of new immigrants disembarking in the docks – just a few of the images, names and associations spontaneously presenting themselves when we think of Buenos Aires in the 1920s and early 1930s.

The meeting of the aesthetic avant-garde with a new economic order and the adoption of a modern life style on a grand scale conspired to weave a symbiotic mesh of city and modernism (Sarlo 1988). Both the urban landscape and the lifestyle of its inhabitants transformed in unison to foster interest in the city as a physical space and as a cultural myth.

Unlike many other immigrant cities, the notion

of Buenos Aires far exceeds the mere hope of a new start into middle-class life: it extends through liberation from societal constraints even unto erotic deliverance. None other than the tango, its musical parentage as enduringly elusive as its etymological roots, could embody this city.

Three factors shape the Buenos Aires of that era: the first, rapid economic growth; the second, the hegemony of European cultural imports; the third, the discord amongst diverse European cultures as well as between these collectively and non-European elements. It is these differences and their resultant various forms of coalescence soon to be summed up by the term “melting pot” and identified as the typical paradigm of the modern (Park/Burgess/McKenzie 1925), which subsequently go on to be discussed as “cultural hybridisation” in the post-structuralist age (Hall 1999).



Immigrants 1888  
Source: Archivo General de la Nación (AGN)



Buenos Aires Harbour 1920  
Source: AGN

### Preceding history: Demographic and economic-political dynamic since 1853

Having gained independence from Spain in 1816 and surmounted internal struggle and strife, Argentina's leadership strove to shed the colonial heritage, stabilise the nation and lead her out of the realm of agricultural dominance and retrogression.

The perceived remedy was to be delivered by the settlement of European immigrants on a grand scale. Faith in this remedy was nourished not only by the desire to benefit from their specialist technical expertise, but also by the firm belief in their civilising influence on the established population. Support for European immigration was written into the 1853 constitution aiming to: "import the freedom of England, the culture of France, and the diligence of the people of Europe and the United States" (Alberdi 1852). This established Buenos Aires as the location of the arrivals' new dawn. Thus mass immigration was seen as the most effective tool to stabilise the population forming: "the only solid basis of the Nation's equality, liberty and – as a result, its wealth" (Rivadavia, s. Oelsner 2007). This demonstrates the extent to which Argentinian immigration policy derived from the ideals of the French revolution, identified by Angelus Eisinger as an essential ingredient of the Open City (2009). The policy soon showed results, triggering successive major waves of immigration. Between

1853 and the turn of the century, the city's population multiplied by a factor of ten: it reached its first million in 1906, passing two million at the end of the twenties, only to begin stabilising around three million shortly after WW2. At the end of the 19th century, four-fifths of the population of Buenos Aires were foreigners. Of these, 40 percent were Italian, the second largest group being Spanish. But French, British, Irish, Germans, Austrians, Swiss, Belgians, Dutch, Portuguese and Russians as well as numerous other immigrants had also settled there.

Nonetheless it was the export of agricultural produce rather than industry which propelled Argentina to the position of seventh most affluent nation during the years of its "Golden Age" between 1880 and 1930. (Schediwy/Hein 2004). Buenos Aires benefited particularly from its estuarine location on the Río de la Plata: its much extended Atlantic harbour became a major trading port, gaining city residents the name *Porteño* or *Porteña*.

### Urban development: Modernisation and Europeanisation

The ambitious project of modernisation was made manifest in infrastructure. The extension of the harbour was complemented by new railway lines, street networks, electricity and power grids, as well as comprehensive water and sewerage systems. 1913 saw the first un-

derground line opened in Buenos Aires. It was to remain unique in the southern hemisphere for many years.

Urban redevelopment too is led by the influence of the European precedent. As a result, between the end of the 19th century and 1930, the ideal of a "South American Paris" saw a number of major axes driven through the Spanish colonial grid. For example, the Avenida de Mayo was created between 1888 and 1894 in much the same fashion as the breakthrough of the Parisian Grand Boulevard. Hardly surprising then that tour guides still today advertise the feeling of being in the centre of Paris or London, rather than South America.

### Cultural mixing

The process of collision between the most diverse ethnias and cultures in Buenos Aires, the various forms of their partial coalescence and joint further development can perhaps best be traced in the music of the tango. Canyengue, fandango, candombe, andalusian tango and habanera have all been identified as sources. At the time of its inception, the tango was in

much greater opposition to bourgeois high culture than it is today. Whilst the latter was opposed by the culture of the indigenous population in other South American countries, Buenos Aires saw the tango facilitate the birth of strongly European-flavoured subculture; right through to the Bandoneon, its typical instrument, developed in the middle of the 19th century by the German music teacher Heinrich Band.

Above and beyond this the cultural confluences in Buenos Aires were also manifested in its language: Cocoliche for example was composed of Italian and Spanish elements. It was mainly spoken by Italian immigrants in the last decades of the 19th century. Cocoliche now exists purely as an element of literature and entertainment, and its disappearance might be seen as evidence of complete assimilation as identified in the melting-pot theory of the Chicago School.

Linguistically and socio-culturally even more interesting is Lunfardo: it was once the slang of the lower orders but has since advanced from sociolect to constituent element of the Argentinian



Aerial view of some of the planned new boulevards  
Source: Caras y Caretas



Men dancing Tango with each other  
Source:AGN

tinian linguistic repertoire, having absorbed elements of Cocoliche along the way. The basis of Lunfardo is Spanish, but it is the words drawn from Italian, English, French and even Polish as well as many other languages which in turn are transformed in colloquial abbreviations and puns which make it distinctive. Contributors also included Porteños as well as Gauchos fleeing the land, Indios and Mesteers. Lunfardo is closely enmeshed with the Tango sharing its background in the confluence of diverse influences.

### Open City Buenos Aires?

Does its orientation towards Europe, its cultural mix, the accompanying creation of the Tango and the rise of world stars such as Carlos Gardel indicate that Buenos Aires in the 1920s offered the essential conditions for the civilisation project of the Open City?

Given the way in which the Tango lent expression to the ongoing establishment of a two-tier society, its classification as evidence of an

Open City can only be achieved with a heavy dose of social romantic idealisation. The Tango celebrates the melancholy and the difficulty of self-assertion experienced by a wide and heterogeneous underclass comprising precisely all those for whom the tantalising "promise of a charmed existence" never materialised (Eisinger 2009). Struggle for survival, tensions and rivalries, longing and home-sickness, prostitution and the lack of women, disappointment, unemployment, lack of perspective, treachery and betrayal – all of these are captured in the Tango. Only a third of immigrants were women, with the result that men most often danced with other men (if they did not pay to dance with a woman), rendering the dance's erotic component academic as often as not. Whether it was the ostentatious licentiousness or whether it was its questioning of the cultural hegemony of the upper class and the way in which it focussed on failure which conditioned the Tango's rebuttal by the church and by the Argentinian elite: either explanation is plausible and the two were most probably mutually reinforcing. It was only after the Tango had

become the latest fashion in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century that it gained social acceptance in Buenos Aires. Nevertheless Carlos Gardel, the Tango singer who was an immigrant and became an international legend, remained an exception.

Even the modernisation of Buenos Aires is a mixed blessing. On the one hand the city was equipped with a modern infrastructure of water supply and sewerage following two great epidemics, yet on the other hand this created a permanent spatial segregation. The affluent classes left the south of the city which grew poorer by degrees.

Opposition to the "Open City" could be detected amongst the Argentinian leading elite even at the beginning of the 20th century. Incoming European workers brought their social and political ideals with them. Soon organisational structures formed to rival those of the established strongholds of European industrial capitalism and unsatisfactory working conditions lead to strikes and social unrest. As a result legislation against foreigners was reinforced, allowing union leaders to be deported. Nevertheless, faith in the positive effects of immigration outweighed "fear of its risks" (Oelsner 2007), and reactionary forces did not (yet) gain the upper hand politically.

The Argentinian modernisation project is not entirely based on European values such as those of the French revolution. Waged against the indigenous people of the Pampa and

Patagonia from 1877 to 1879 and causing the death of large sections of the indigenous population, the Conquista del Desierto was viewed as a decisive step towards the stabilisation of the country at the time. Current research generally agrees that it was in fact a case of genocide fuelled by extreme racism (Blum 2001). The dead of the Conquista del Desierto also included numerous Afro-Argentines fighting to support government troops. As the end of the colonial period, this group has made up around 40 per cent of the population of Buenos Aires (Windus 2005), and yet today no other country in South America – with the exception of Uruguay – has a similarly low percentage of Indio, Mestee and Criollo populations.

It was towards the end of the first third of the 20th century that it finally became apparent that the "promise of a charmed existence" could not be delivered in perpetuity. Universal suffrage did not arrive in Argentina until 1912. In 1930, poor market conditions in agricultural markets arising from the global economic crisis contributed to a right-wing military coup which was followed by a sequence of alternating dictatorships. Argentina remained a country of immigration, but the flavour gradually changed: in the early 1930s opponents of the Nazi regime such as the conductors Fritz Busch and Erich Kleiber still emigrated to Buenos Aires, but in 1938 a new decree made the immigration of Jews more difficult. After the second world war, Juan Peron systematically set about bringing war criminals, SS-members and other



Contrast of affluent north (left) and poor south (right). Source: AGN



Juan and Evita Peron at Plaza Mayor (1951)  
Source: AGN

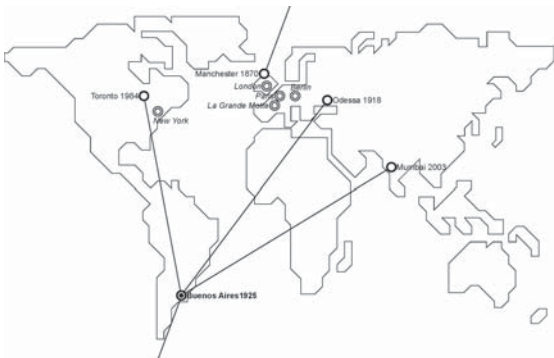
co-perpetrators of the Nazi regime to the country. These included Adolf Eichmann and Josef Mengele, for whom Peron provided a bespoke newspaper as a purpose-made platform (Goñi 2006).

#### Insights into the history of the “Open City”

Buenos Aires demonstrates the transitory in the Open City project: moments of openness are fleeting and based on fragile constellations. The dark shadows accompanying the process of Nation-making and Europeanisation from the outset are equally apparent. It also emerges that social mobility and cultural mix can not be taken unquestioningly as indices of a city's openness – irrespective of whether the discussion is set against the background of modern paradigms such as the melting-pot theory, or in the context of post-structuralist concepts such as hybridisation. At the very least it is a case of illuminating the relationship between horizontal and vertical mobility and identifying the overall direction of travel.

Researchd and written by  
Jörg Seifert & Maren Harnack





#### Further Reading

- Alberdi; Juan Bautista (1852): Bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República Argentina, Buenos Aires: „La Cultura argentina“ (2. ed. 1915).
- Blum, Volkmar (2001): Hybridisierung von unten. Nation und Gesellschaft im mittleren Andenraum, Münster et. al.
- Eisinger, Angelus (2009): „The Open City and the Historical Context“, in: Christiaan, et al. (eds.): Open City: Designing Coexistence, Amsterdam
- Gofii, Uki (2006): Odessa: Die wahre Geschichte. Fluchthilfe für NS-Kriegsverbrecher, Berlin/Hamburg
- Hall, Stuart (1999): „Kulturelle Identität und Globalisierung“, in: Hörning, Karl Heinz / Winter, Rainer (eds.): Widerspenstige Kulturen. Frankfurt am Main
- Jakob, Markus (1997): „So tönt Buenos Aires“, in: Du, Die Zeitschrift der Kultur. Heft 11, November 1997, Zürich
- Lambert, Rolf (1997): „Das doppelte A“, in: Du, Die Zeitschrift der Kultur. Heft 11, November 1997, Zürich
- Oelsner, Verónica (2007): „Die Europäische Einwanderung in Argentinien 1810–1914“ online at <http://www.euro-pa.clio-online.de/2007/Article=254> (Zugriff: 23.06.2009).
- Park, Robert E. et al. (1925): The City, Chicago
- Sarlo, Beatriz (1988): Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930, Buenos Aires
- Schediwy, Robert / Hein, Wolfgang (2004): „Buenos Aires. Herrin der hundert Flüsse“, in: Schediwy Robert: Städtebilder. Reflexionen zum Wandel in Architektur und Urbanistik, Münster et. al
- Windus, Astrid (2005): Afroargentinier und Nation. Kon-

struktionsweisen afroargentinischer Identität im Buenos Aires des 19. Jahrhunderts. Leipzig

“Points of Observation. Open City 1850 – 2009” is a collaboration project by Nina Brodowski, Angelus Eisinger and Maren Harnack with Michael Koch, Jörg Seifert and Gesa Ziemer.

Points of observations  
 Paris 1873  
 Buenos Aires 1920  
 Bethnal Green 1953  
 La Grande Motte 1960  
 New York 1978  
 Berlin 1999

**HCU** | **HafenCity Universität**  
 Hamburg