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052144165X - Politics and Urban Growth in Buenos Aires 1910-1942

Richard J. Walter

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Flying over Buenos Aires, Argentina's capital and largest city, the North American traveler might be reminded of Chicago. Arriving from the east one sees modern skyscrapers close to the edge of a large body of water, in this case the muddy brown of the broad estuary of the Río de la Plata rather than the gray-blue of Lake Michigan. The city itself is laid out in a grid pattern, interlaced with broader boulevards and a handful of superhighways. To the north stretch affluent suburbs and to the south, blue-collar, industrial concentrations. Beyond the city and its sprawling suburbs, today containing eleven million inhabitants, or one-third of the national population, is a seemingly endless prairie of rich, dark soil and abundant grasses, the immensely fertile and productive Argentine *pampa*. A network of railroads and highways crossing the pampa converges from the north, west, and south and terminates in Buenos Aires like the ribs of a fan.

Once on the ground, there are some additional reminders of the midwestern metropolis. The terrain of the city is essentially flat, but with several gentle rises here and there and a pronounced embankment along the eastern and northeastern edge leading down to the Río de la Plata estuary. Another river, the Riachuelo, provides the southern boundary of the federal capital itself. Slaughterhouses and meat-packing plants can be found in the western and southern parts of the city. However, the image also begins to change. Buenos Aires is a multiethnic city, but one that is overwhelmingly southern European in composition instead of the mix of largely Irish, Polish, and African Americans found in Chicago. The richness of culture, the pace of life, and the general cosmopolitanism of the city's inhabitants, the *porteños* (residents of the port city), are reminiscent of New York. The broad avenues, sidewalk cafés, fine restaurants, and elegantly dressed men and women produce echoes of Paris. The language and the late hours for dining and entertaining are reminiscent of Madrid or Barcelona; the exaggerated gestures, the rhythm and intonation of daily conversation, and the driving habits belong to Rome and Milan.

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Although one is tempted to compare Buenos Aires with many other large cities, a closer examination reveals special features. As the national capital, the city is dominated by government and the people who work for it. The additional characteristic of being the nation's major port and its commercial and industrial center gives it a national predominance of which few cities can boast. Its particular ethnic mix, predominantly Spanish and Italian, but containing as well a substantial Jewish community, also makes it unique.

Whereas to many it is the most European of Latin America's cities, it is also clearly a new world metropolis, whose greatest growth has occurred over the past century. Like the larger nation that it dominates, it seems to be part European, part American, producing something of an identity crisis that continues to bedevil many of its inhabitants. Adding to the sense of uncertainty has been the decline of the capital and the nation from a clear position of continental preeminence before World War II to a yet-to-be defined lesser rank when compared with, for example, Brazil and the dynamic metropolis of São Paulo.

Whatever its relative position, since the beginning of the twentieth century Buenos Aires has continued to be one of the world's foremost cities. As such, it attracts the casual visitor as well as the scholar. Foreigners and Argentines alike have produced an abundance of literature about the city, ranging from impressionistic essays to studies of local neighborhoods to one- or two-volume tomes filled with photographs and maps that seek to cover the history of the city from its initial founding in 1536 to the present.

Despite the outpouring of works on the city, there are relatively few overviews of particularly important periods in its growth. A significant exception is James R. Scobie's pioneering social history of the formative years (1870-1910) of the modern city, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb*, published in 1974. In this work, Scobie analyzed the demographic growth and characteristics of the city, the locational forces of ports and railroads, the composition and lives of various social groups, cultural aspects, the role of public transportation, and what he called the "commercial-bureaucratic" nature of the federal capital.

The purpose of my book is to continue along the trail that Scobie blazed. I shall focus on the subsequent thirty years or so, from 1910 to the early 1940s, a period in the city's history that has not yet been studied in its totality. Like the preceding four decades examined by Scobie, these were years of dynamic expansion and growth. They were characterized by many significant continuities with the past, but were also marked by equally significant changes; both patterns will be explored in the pages that follow.

Attempting to write the history of a city as large and complex as

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Buenos Aires, even for what appears a relatively limited period, is a formidable task. The number of subjects that might be covered and the approaches that could be adopted seem almost endless. With this in mind, I have chosen to focus on local politics and government, particularly on the role of the city's executive branch, led by the *intendente*, or mayor, and the *Concejo Deliberante*, or city council, in the process of Buenos Aires' growth. The focus seems justified for three reasons: First, the local administration, although not the sole decision-making authority to affect the capital, was nonetheless the main actor in this process. To a large extent, the city that emerged at the end of the period I am writing about was guided and shaped by local officials. Second, whether or not it affected certain aspects of city growth, local government, especially through the activities of the legislative branch, served as a reflection of larger developments in the metropolis. The debates of the city council over numerous issues reveal a great deal about the nature of urban growth and its associated problems. Third, despite their importance, there has been no comprehensive study of local politics and administration in Buenos Aires or, for that matter, in other major Latin American cities. This oversight is particularly striking when compared, for example, with the many studies of U.S. city politics that scrutinize mayors, city councils, and other mechanisms of municipal administration.

As this is essentially its first telling, the story will be related in a chronological, narrative fashion. It will describe in particular the struggle to make local government more democratic, notably through a major reform in the manner of electing the city council implemented in 1918. The story will also describe the background and subsequent impact of that reform during the years 1918 to late 1941 when the council was dissolved and the experiment in local democracy temporarily halted. The periodic elections held in Buenos Aires to select the city council (the *intendente* was appointed by the national government), the composition of the council that resulted from these contests, and the issues that came before it will also receive attention. Drawing upon the minutes of the council debates as a principal source, I shall review how various parties and participants acted within that institution and the relation of these actions to larger developments.

During the period under consideration, the council dealt with myriad concerns related to the city's growth. These ranged from questions of public health and the management of municipal hospitals to the naming of streets and plazas to the granting of licenses for commercial purposes to the operation of places of amusement and culture. Although I will touch on many of these, a full treatment of every one would be impractical. Therefore, I have determined to focus on debates involving major public works projects, public transportation, and the provision of services like

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gas and electric power to the city. These issues were consistently prominent in the council's deliberations and in the public's concerns with municipal affairs. The results of the debates on these fundamental matters had a wide and lasting impact on the city's inhabitants. Public works, often constructed with the aim of improving the movement of vehicles and pedestrians, enhancing the "monumental" appearance of the capital, and providing access to popular areas of recreation, dramatically changed the physical aspect of Buenos Aires in these years. Public transportation, which played a key role in opening up outlying areas of the city to settlement, was used by just about everyone every day, and its operations and costs were constant concerns for the public. Electricity and gas powered the development of the city, and the operation of the enterprises that controlled and provided these services and the rates they charged for them also affected nearly every porteño consumer.

In addition to considering the role of the city council, I shall also describe the part played by the various intendentes who headed the municipality in these years. In their role as highly important officials in the Argentine republic, several intendentes during this period made an indelible mark on the capital's progress, mainly through their sponsorship and implementation of major construction projects and public works. The intendentes worked closely and well with the council on the many occasions when both branches of government agreed on the course of municipal management and growth. There were numerous other occasions, however, when they disagreed fundamentally with the council, producing conflict and deadlock.

The story of the local government's actions will be interlaced with general material on the city's development. Summary chapters, using census data, information on popular culture, the observations of foreign visitors, and other sources, will describe the overall growth of the city. These chapters will serve as the basic framework in which to locate the functions of the local government and the part it played in the history of Buenos Aires between 1910 and the early 1940s.

Although the principal emphasis will be on local government, I shall also consider the role of the other main participant in the city's growth: the national government of the Argentine republic. To achieve this, I shall review the elections in the capital to select national executives as well as representatives to the national Congress. The results of these contests, like those at the local level, often had a direct bearing on decisions affecting the capital, not the least of which involved appointment and approval of the city's intendente. Other aspects of the federal government's role will be discussed where pertinent. Like the often discordant nature of the relations between the intendente and the council, relations between the local and federal authorities were frequently uneasy and

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confrontational, although productive periods of cooperation occurred as well.

This book evolves from my previous studies of Argentina's Socialist party, whose main base of support was in the federal capital, and of politics in the province of Buenos Aires for roughly the same period. It also stems from a long-standing interest both generally in urban politics and particularly in the city of Buenos Aires, which I first visited in 1964 for a year of dissertation research. Since then, I have returned on several occasions for periods ranging from two months to a year. Throughout those visits, the city and its history have never ceased to intrigue me. Like most relatively privileged foreign visitors, I probably harbor a more favorable image of Buenos Aires than do its inhabitants, who over the years have had to deal with it and the nation's many frustrations. Nonetheless, in this study I have attempted to provide a balanced and comprehensive account, noting both the failures and successes of local administrations in their management of municipal affairs as well as the flaws and positive aspects of the metropolis they have created. I have also tried to give an inkling of the flavor of city life and the concerns and character of the bulk of the population. Some matters of undoubted importance, such as the role of immigrant communities, the state of the working classes, and the status of women in the city, have probably received less attention than they deserve. Others have dealt with these subjects more satisfactorily and in greater depth. Some might also find that I have provided either too much or too little detail on certain crucial issues and events, while omitting altogether others of significance. To this potential complaint I can only respond that I hope my efforts stimulate others to look more deeply into and to expand on matters that I have raised. Although there is much we do know of the history of the city of Buenos Aires, there is clearly a good deal yet to be learned.

## 1

## Buenos Aires after the centenario

In May 1910 Argentina celebrated the hundredth anniversary of its first steps toward independence with a spectacular exposition called the *centenario* in the city of Buenos Aires. Parades and processions through the downtown area and exhibitions in a park in the center of the city attracted thousands of visitors. Representatives from other American nations and from Europe marveled at the tremendous progress achieved in what was then Latin America's wealthiest and most advanced nation. Spanish writer Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, an enthusiastic admirer of the South American republic, attended the celebration and produced a costly and well-illustrated volume, *Argentina y sus grandezas*, intended to attract even more of his fellow countrymen to the booming new nation.<sup>1</sup> Of Argentina's "*grandezas*," none was more notable than the capital city of Buenos Aires. For the French statesman Georges Clemenceau, another centennial-year guest, Buenos Aires was like "a great city of Europe, giving the sensation of premature growth, but, by its prodigious advancement, the capital of a continent."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the growth had been both "prodigious" and spectacular. From a riverside town of almost 180,000 persons in 1870, Buenos Aires had become a modern metropolis of 1.2 million by 1910. The growth of the city, like that of the country, had been fueled by the development of a soaring agricultural export economy, heavy foreign investment, especially from Great Britain, and massive foreign immigration, mostly from Italy and Spain. Symbols of the city's expansion and modernity included the magnificent Colón opera house, which opened in 1908 and rivaled any such hall in the world, and the beautiful Avenida de Mayo, the "Champs d'Élysées" of Buenos Aires inspired by Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann's Parisian design.

The *avenida*, a broad tree-lined boulevard completed in the late

1 Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *Argentina y sus grandezas* (Madrid, 1910).

2 Susana Pereira, *Viajeros del siglo xx y la realidad nacional* (Buenos Aires, 1984), p. 22. For a description of the centennial celebration, see Thomas F. McGann, *Argentina, The United States and the Inter-American System, 1880-1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 274-5.

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nineteenth century, ran east to west and connected the presidential mansion, the Casa Rosada, with the newly finished Palacio del Congreso, or national Congress building. The plaza in front of the Congress, inaugurated in 1910, remained unfinished, but was destined to be one of the city's most important open spaces, not least because of its strategic location as the site of numerous political demonstrations.<sup>3</sup>

From the time of the centennial to the outbreak of World War I, the growth of the city continued along much the same lines as before. Between 1910 and 1913, almost 1.4 million foreigners entered Argentina. Although almost half as many of them also left the country in these years, about 670,000 stayed, the majority settling in the capital city. As a result, Buenos Aires had an overall population of close to 1.6 million by 1914, making it one of the fastest growing and populous cities in the world at the time.<sup>4</sup> By 1914, too, one of every five Argentines resided in the capital and one of every four lived in the metropolitan area, reinforcing a primacy that continued and grew throughout the twentieth century (see Table 1.1).

Few cities in the world so dominated the rest of the nation as did Buenos Aires and few, in turn, were so ruled by the foreign component. The municipal census of 1909 had counted 46 percent of the city's population as foreign-born. By 1914 and the third national census the foreign proportion was almost half the total (see Table 1.1), with a sizable percentage of the Argentine component undoubtedly represented by the offspring of the waves of foreigners who had been arriving constantly since the 1880s. Immigrants came from all corners of the globe. The leading groups, however, were from Italy (312,267) and Spain (306,850); by 1914 they composed almost 80 percent (619,117) of the 777,845 immigrant total. Other significant foreign communities were Russian Jews (28,846), Uruguayans (28,436), French (27,923), immigrants from the Ottoman empire, generically called "turcos" (15,847), Germans (10,942), and Englishmen (9,195).<sup>5</sup> The typical immigrant was an unattached adult male looking to strike it rich in Argentina and return to his homeland. Accordingly, foreign males outnumbered foreign females by a margin of three to two, leading to a citywide preponderance of males (54 percent of the population in 1914) over females. Despite the lack of foreign females, most foreigners appeared to prefer to marry within

3 Ricardo Luis Molinari, *Buenos Aires, 4 siglos* (Buenos Aires, 1980), pp. 400–1. For an overview of the growth of the city before the centennial, see James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870–1910* (New York, 1974).

4 Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (hereafter as MCBA), *General Census of the Population, Buildings, Trades, and Industries of the City of Buenos Aires* (taken on October 16 to 24, 1909).

5 República Argentina, *Tercer censo nacional, levantado el 1° de junio de 1914* (Buenos Aires, 1916), vol. 2, pp. 129–48.

Table 1.1. *Population of Argentina, the city of Buenos Aires, and the metropolitan area, by sex and nationality, 1914 and 1947*

Sex and nationality	Argentina		City of Buenos Aires		Metropolitan area*	
	Totals (N)	%	Absolute (N)	%	Absolute (N)	%
<i>1914</i>				% of nation		% of nation
Argentine males	2,753,214	34.9	394,463	25.0	527,666	25.9
Argentine females	2,774,071	35.2	403,506	25.6	536,547	26.4
Foreign males	1,473,809	18.7	455,507	28.9	568,031	27.9
Foreign females	884,143	11.2	323,338	20.5	402,787	19.8
Total males	4,227,023	53.6	849,970	53.9	1,095,697	53.8
Total females	3,658,314	46.4	726,844	46.1	939,334	46.2
Total Argentines	5,527,285	70.1	797,969	50.6	1,064,213	52.3
Total foreigners	2,357,952	29.9	778,845	49.4	970,818	47.7
Total	7,885,237		1,576,814		2,035,031	
<i>1947</i>				% of nation		% of nation
Argentine males	6,730,739	42.3	1,005,206	33.7	1,701,238	35.5
Argentine females	6,727,161	42.3	1,156,756	38.8	1,845,967	38.5
Foreign males	1,414,436	8.9	444,200	14.9	687,477	14.3
Foreign females	1,021,491	6.4	376,418	12.6	564,078	11.8
Total males	8,145,175	51.2	1,449,406	48.6	2,388,715	49.8
Total females	7,748,652	48.8	1,533,174	51.4	2,410,045	50.2
Total Argentines	13,457,900	84.7	2,161,962	72.5	3,547,205	73.9
Total foreigners	2,435,927	15.3	820,618	27.5	1,251,555	26.1
Total	15,892,827		2,982,580		4,798,760	

\* Includes surrounding counties of greater Buenos Aires.

Sources: República Argentina, *Tercer censo nacional*, vol. 2, pp. 3 (city), 3-37 (metropolitan area), and 109 (national), and República Argentina, *Cuarto censo general de la nación*, 1947 (Buenos Aires, 1947), pp. 12 (city and national) and 90-103 (metropolitan area).



their own ethnic group rather than to seek mates in the Argentine community.<sup>6</sup>

In Buenos Aires, foreigners dominated the ownership of real estate, industry, and commerce. In 1909 they owned 60 percent of the landed property in the city of Buenos Aires, with one group, the Italians, owning almost as many parcels as the Argentines.<sup>7</sup> Foreign owners of industries outnumbered Argentines by three to one, proportions that remained pretty much the same five years later.<sup>8</sup>

Foreigners at first clustered in the downtown area near the river, moving into old colonial homes converted into tenements or "*conventillos*." Gradually, however, they and many Argentines began to move outward from the city's center to what were then distant suburban districts.<sup>9</sup> The trend was noted in the five years between the 1904 and 1909 municipal censuses, which recorded a marked increase in the districts to the south, west, and north of the central city and stagnation or decline in the central districts. The trend continued over the next five years with outlying census districts 1 and 15 through 17 almost doubling in population and accounting for better than 50 percent of the city's growth overall (see Map 1 and Appendix, Table A.1). With the rush to districts such as Flores, Vélez Sársfield, Palermo, and Saavedra, municipal services were slow to follow. Many new areas of settlement lacked running water, sewers, lighting, and paved streets and the city government often took many years to provide these services.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the move continued.

Foreigners came to be associated with particular parts of the city. Spaniards tended to settle in the central districts, particularly on or near the Avenida de Mayo. The best-known Italian district was the waterfront area of La Boca, at the mouth of the Riachuelo River, home to an important community originally from Genoa.<sup>11</sup> The district around the Plaza Once de Septiembre, the main terminus of the western railroad, was the

6 Samuel L. Baily, "Marriage Patterns and Immigrant Assimilation in Buenos Aires, 1881-1923," *Hispanic American Historical Review* (hereafter as *HAHR*), 60, 1 (1980), pp. 32-48.

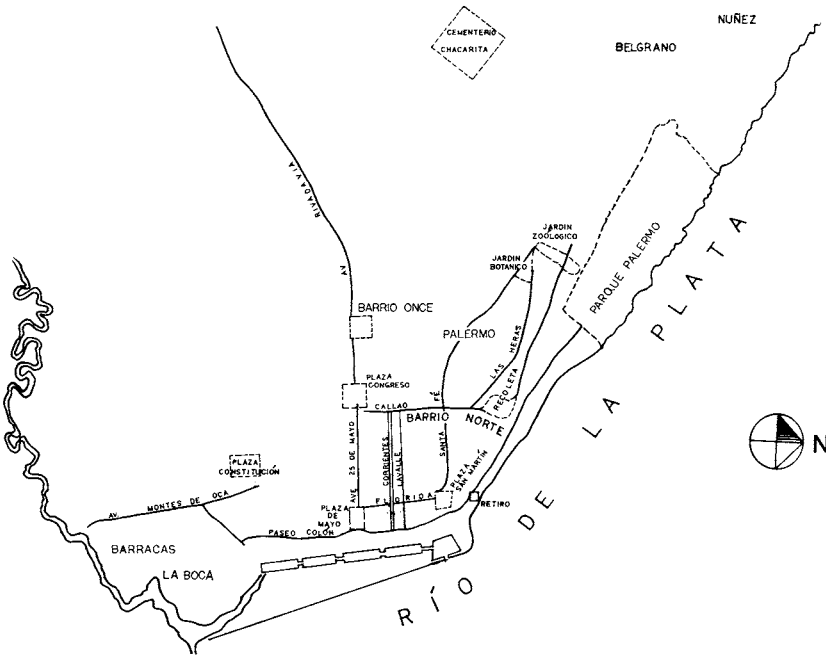
7 *General Census of the Population*, vol. 1, p. 103. See also Carl Solberg, *Immigration and Nationalism: Argentina and Chile: 1890-1914* (Austin, Tex., 1970), pp. 56-8.

8 *General Census of the Population*, vol. 1, pp. 134 and 152 and República Argentina, *Tercer censo nacional*, vol. 7, p. 120 and vol. 8, p. 145.

9 Scobie, *Buenos Aires*, pp. 178-200 and Charles S. Sargent, *The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1870-1930* (Tempe, Ariz., 1974).

10 According to one report, in 1910 only 46,530 houses in Buenos Aires had sewer services whereas 64,605 were without them and only about half of the city's homes had running water. F.R. Cibilibis, "La descentralización urbana de la ciudad de Buenos Aires," *Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo*, no. 15 (Buenos Aires: December 31, 1909), pp. 87-97.

11 For more on the Italian immigrant community, see Samuel L. Baily, "The Adjustment of Italian Immigrants into the United States and Argentina: A Comparative Analysis," *The American Historical Review*, 88, 2 (April 1983), pp. 281-305.



Map 1. Buenos Aires downtown, 1913 (drawn by Fredy Merico).

center of the Jewish community. A 1912 article in the popular weekly *Caras y Caretas* described suburban Belgrano as an “English square,” the areas of downtown Calle Suipacha as French as Montmartre, and the blocks close to Plaza Retiro, dominated by immigrants from the Middle East, as a “suburb of old Istanbul.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite these clusters, Buenos Aires in general had fewer of the well-defined ethnic neighborhoods that characterized North American cities. Representatives of all sizable immigrant communities, especially the Spanish and Italian, could be found scattered throughout the city. It was true that, by 1914, foreigners came to make up larger proportions of downtown districts than did Argentines, whereas the native-born came to predominate in the suburbs. Nevertheless, in no census district, either in 1909 or in 1914, did foreigners comprise less than 35 percent or more than 66 percent of the total population. This general diffusion and lack of clear ethnic clustering may have resulted from the fact that so many of the foreign-born were from Italy and Spain, thereby sharing the Catholic religion, the same general cultural values, and, if not the identical

<sup>12</sup> Coyo Cuello, “Buenos Aires Cosmopolita,” *Caras y Caretas*, 15, 716 (Buenos Aires: June 22, 1912).