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THE NATIONALISM SYNDROME IN ARGENTINA

NATIONALISM DEFINED

This study is a modest attempt to examine some general aspects of nationalism in the Argentine context.* It should be mentioned at the start that there is no comprehensive definition for nationalism and in this connection it may be useful to explore some of the various ways in which the term is employed.

Professor Toynbee defines nationalism as “a state of mind in which we give our paramount political loyalty to one fraction of the human race—to the particular tribe of which we happen to be tribesmen.”1 Professor Ebenstein describes nationalism since the French Revolution as “one of the driving forces of domestic, imperial, and international politics.”2 From his observation of Western countries, Myrdal prefers to view nationalism in terms of “an irrational force, driving . . . [western countries] to more disruptive policies internationally than are in their own long-term interests.”3 The meaning of nationalism according to Karl Deutsch is functionally conveyed in the notion of “nationality” which

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* The author wishes to thank Professor Russell H. Fitzgibbon for his guidance and criticism of the manuscript.
“may be applied to a people among whom there exists a significant movement toward political, economic, or cultural autonomy. . . .”

Nationalism has found increasing attention as a dynamic of the Latin American process. Professor Kalman Silvert views nationalism in Latin America as a sort of reaction to modernity which manifests itself in a reluctance “to renounce the advantages of traditionalism and an oversimplified universalism. . . .” Fontaine and Kohnstamm find it more meaningful to focus on the metaphysical side of the concept of nationalism, the operational value of which dichotomizes into two hypotheses: either “the nation is an end in itself, or the nation is tending to be left behind by current events.” Professor Scott prefers to speak of a “constructive nationalism” which he relates to a country’s ability to cope effectively with problems both at home and abroad which impede national integration; Professor Whitaker feels that the meaning of the concept is best drawn out “in terms of its functioning as an instrument of integration and the realization of desired goals.” According to Professor Fitzgibbon, “nationalism in Latin America . . . gears into the traditional pattern of oligarchic monopoly built upon a sharp horizontal social dichotomy.”

To date, it is not possible to speak of a general definition of nationalism nor to discover common agreement on the meaning of the terms employed to describe it. Nationalism is in effect many things. It has various ramifications, and this observation points up one of the major difficulties that will be encountered by the student who ventures to explore this concept within the framework of the problems surrounding political behavior in the Argentine context.

Nationalism can exist at any point in time and is sensitive to the stresses and strains of its particular environment. For the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to allow that nationalism is described in terms

of the political culture of a country (whether in a developed or under-developed stage of growth) which manifests itself either directly or indirectly in the attitudes or goal-orientations of similar or dissimilar interest groups toward either real or theoretical issues relating to the problem of building and/or preserving the nation-state. In this connection there are certain identifiable patterns of Argentine nationalism which should be considered at least from a theoretical standpoint.

**Patterns of Nationalism**

There are several complementary situations which seem to point up the presence of nationalism and which appropriately enough may provide some semblance of order to the analysis of the character which nationalism has assumed in the Argentine context. The thesis advanced in the following paragraphs is simply that there is not one, but several, fluid patterns of nationalism in the Argentine political system.

There is what may be called a nationalism of manifest destiny which characterizes the very psychological make-up of the Argentine people. This particular frame of mind emerged in part from their colonial heritage and, later on, the achievement of independence which filled them with millennial expectations for the realization of an El Dorado in which their national superiority would hold sway. Ortega y Gasset describes this facet of Argentine behavior:

> The Argentine people are not content to be one nation among many; they require an exalted destiny, they demand of themselves a proud future, they have no taste for a history without triumph and are determined to command. They may or may not succeed, but it is extremely interesting to witness the historical trajectory of a people called to empire.

Also to be noted around this time is the emergence of another form of nationalism which may be labeled creole nationalism. This particular form of nationalism is best described in terms of its political and ideological framework within which a number of political alterations and

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9 This definition is, on balance, conjectural and, of necessity, approximate; it is intended to be more heuristic than comprehensive in scope. For those who want labels, it may perhaps be explained as a kind of “reactive nationalism,” reacting negatively against forces which threaten the nation’s independence, cohesiveness, political organization, autonomy, legitimacy; and reacting positively toward all policy-moves intended to enhance national status. Cf. Gustavo Lagos, *International Stratification and Underdeveloped Countries* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963).


11 José Ortega y Gasset, *Obras de José Ortega y Gasset* (Madrid, 1943) I, 661.
imbalances developed. To understand this brand of nationalism it is necessary to become aware of the bitter feelings which existed between the creoles and the peninsulars. Briefly, Romero tells us: "Creoles and peninsulares were two social classes who felt themselves to be enemies because of their relationship: the privileges of one determined the inferiority of the other." Simply, the political frustrations of the creole became translated into a virulent form of xenophobic nationalism in which Spaniards and, for that matter, anything Spanish was anathema. It triggered a split within the creole ranks bringing about the creation of two important centers: one manned by the so-called porteño group and the other by the creoles of the interior. This nationalism in effect turned out to be divisive, unable to create sufficient consensus regarding conceptions of authority and national purpose essential to bringing about political cooperation between the forces of Buenos Aires and those of the interior. In Romero's words, "while Buenos Aires advocated a national view of the fatherland, the groups of the interior showed a marked indifference for what was, in their eyes, still a vague abstraction. . . . they overvalued their pequeña patria—their 'little fatherland'—which they could sense and to which they were united by daily existence."

Thus, creole nationalism as it manifested itself in its ideological matrix of the post-independence period lent itself more to a process of fragmentation than to a workable combination of disparate interests. An attitude of ambivalence rather than compromise prevailed regarding the norms which would serve to bring the new nation into a workable balance with the political demands of nationhood. Under what might be labeled a porteño nationalism, a politicization campaign was launched under the banner of republicanism in a desperate attempt to unify the recalcitrant sectors of the interior. If in theory porteño nationalism spoke with the voice of political integration based on a sharing of political ends and means, in practice it represented a national movement

13 Romero, A History of Argentine Political Thought, p. 64.
15 Romero, op. cit., p. 65.
16 Ricardo Zorraquín Becú, El federalismo argentino (Buenos Aires: Librería y Editorial "La Facultad" Bernabé y Cía, 1939), Chapters I, II, IV.
17 Romero, op. cit., p. 67.
18 Ibid., p. 73.
in which Buenos Aires was the voice of the nation and the rightful and sole heir to the political hegemony of the nation-state.

This rigid ideological orientation of porteño nationalism triggered in turn another form of nationalist sentiment which manifested itself somewhat in the guise of a patriotism among the rural sectors of the Littoral and of the interior. Briefly, this was a regional nationalism, opposed to the centralism of the Port and strongly in favor of a federalism which would underscore the special virtues of provincial autonomy.

The prospects for reconciling the nationalism of the Port with that of the peripheral regions proved unworkable. Instead, a polarization of interests took place crystallizing in the formation of two political groups: the Unitarists (unitarios) and the Federals (federales), the former supporting control by Buenos Aires, the latter opposing it. Instead, a polarization of interests took place crystallizing in the formation of two political groups: the Unitarists (unitarios) and the Federals (federales), the former supporting control by Buenos Aires, the latter opposing it. Underlying the forces of political cleavage, there remained a strong desire for compromise and consensus on the all-important issue of preserving the country's hard-won nationhood. The problem, simply stated, was one of trying to reconcile the aspirations and interests of the interior with those of Buenos Aires. Several measures were attempted, the gist of which was to work out a kind of peaceful co-existence between two systems of government. The Buenos Aires elite opted in favor of centralism while the caudillos of the interior held fast to the principle of provincial autonomy. The Argentine people were thus subjected to the stimuli of two nationalisms, two conceptions of the state and two approaches to the problem of organizing the nation as a stable unit. In effect, the problem was not so much one of defining the national interests but rather of determining the ultimate center of authority through which the national interest could be funneled and articulated as an institutionalized norm.

There were obstacles to national unification but an awareness of nationhood continued to influence the general goals of political action. It finally took the authoritarian devices of the powerful gaucho chief, Juan Manuel de Rosas, to break the political stalemate and to achieve unification of the country. Through a coercive mobilization program Rosas managed to transform the political culture into a synthetic form of
integral nationalism geared to providing an ongoing sense of continuity to the nation-state. Following the overthrow of Rosas in 1852, there emerged another strain of nationalism characterized by a spirit of compromise which culminated in the national Constitution of 1853, followed by a process of national integration under the presidential guidance of Bartolomé Mitre, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and Nicolás Avellaneda, respectively. The crowning point of this new manifestation of nationalism was realized with the federalization of the city of Buenos Aires which marked a significant milestone in Argentine nationhood.

To the extent that we are trying to approximate patterns or tendencies of nationalism in the Argentine experience, it may be useful to ask to what extent there exists an essential link between nationalism and the federalizing process. Even to hint at this question is to open up a Pandora's box of debatable issues which may best be passed over in silence. The long-abiding issues which federalism involves cannot be settled in the present study. Nevertheless, the influence of federalism as it relates to the problem of nationalism in Argentina should be noted here.

It is a great deal easier to assert the compatibility and/or incompatibility of both these processes than to lay out with any measure of precision theoretical arguments for or against the priority given one over the other. It has been vigorously affirmed by Professor Friedrich that Federalism and nationalism are neither naturally linked, as the nineteenth century was inclined to believe, nor are they naturally opposed to each other as is at times asserted at present. It depends upon the underlying social structure of the political communities which are to be federally organized.

In the Argentine experience, it would appear that nationalism and federalism tend to complement each other, underscoring more the forces of integration than those of differentiation. In sum, the process is one in which, as Pellegrini puts it, “Las Provincias mandan, la capital dirige”, literally translated, “the provinces demand, the capital directs.”

The Argentine’s concept of federalism is well stated by the Argentine scholar Ricardo Zorraquín Becú as follows: “the increasing

26 Romero, Chapter V.
27 Ibid., p. 159.
complexity of . . . [modern] problems requires uniformity of direction and of criterion in order to resolve them, and the progressive increase of governmental functions necessarily forces a widening of the powers of the central government." On balance, this brand of federalism resembles the kind adopted by such new states as Pakistan, India, Malaya, to mention a few, where commitment to political and economic modernization is of primary importance to the political elites of these countries. Given this general orientation, it may be useful to interpret Argentine federalism less in terms of its legalistic framework and more in terms of its instrumental and utilitarian potential to produce political attitudes basic to the overall function of national integration.

Professor Scott, who analyzes the national integration problem as it relates to the experience of the Latin American countries, contends that Argentina, to mention one country, has "not succeeded in constructing a truly broadly based nation-state." This statement is made on the basis of Scott's general thesis that "in each of the twenty republics . . . no matter how much or how little the material and cultural factors have shifted, the problems of identity and congruity remain paramount values to nation-building." A study was carried out a few decades ago by the Argentine scholar Rodolfo Rivarola in which he sought to ascertain the attitudes of a group of Argentine conscripts toward the nation. Rivarola's findings bear some relevance to the general problem of identity posed by Scott. According to Rivarola:

When asked which was their patria, they [the respondents] would either declare they did not know, or respond with the name of their village, of their province, or of the foreign nation to which their parents belonged. To the Argentine flag they attributed colors which it never had; and as for the name of the president of the republic or the governor of the province, they ignored these words: the highest authority they knew was that of the local commissioner.

It has been argued that the processes of national integration in Argentina have been retarded by the failure of nationalism to produce

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30 Ibid., p. 276.
32 Zorraquin Becú, Chapter IX.
34 Ibid., p. 79.
35 Rodolfo Rivarola, La constitución argentina y sus principios de ética política (Rosario: Editorial Rosario, 1944), p. 103.
stable political structures.36 The Peronist era, however, produced a unique pattern of nationalism the vestiges of which continue to pervade the Argentine context. Briefly, Perón's nationalism manifested itself in a pattern of economic independence which stressed development and industrialization; in a pattern of Argentine hegemony in which Argentina would hold sway over the entire Latin American region; and finally, in a brand of xenophobia directed in the main against the United States.37

Perón's approach was direct and forceful, and the goal of his nationalism was the enhancement of Argentine prestige both at home and abroad.38 But, as Professor Lagos notes, Perón's policy of prestige did not conform to "the real status of the nation," i.e., the capacity of the nation to survive the military and economic undercurrents of world politics.39 No one will deny that the prerequisites for the success of Peronist nationalism were present (and some still are even today) at the time Perón decided upon developing a philosophical defense of his regime. The Argentines were in the right frame of mind to pay heed to, if not to welcome, any ideology that would cater to their aspirations for national grandeur.

To approximate why Peronist nationalism in its broadest outlines failed, it might be useful to examine briefly Perón's political system. A diagram of Juan Domingo Perón's regime in terms of the Easton model40 would show both demands and supports originating in labor, the military, the Church, and in the masses. Support for his government stemmed in the main from the argentinidad or national feeling of the Argentine people, the ability of the government to produce satisfactory outputs for the varying demands of the military, the magnanimous rewards given labor, not to mention the material and legal advantages given to the Church.41 He managed to keep all these factors of support in a fluid coalition. His government was a personal one and, true to Almond's model of the authoritarian political system, the political functions of articulation, aggregation, and rule-making could hardly be differentiated

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39 Ibid., p. 149.
from one another. The boundaries between party, legislature, and bureaucracy were poorly maintained; but, through the Peronist party and a cogent form of personalismo, Perón managed to link up to himself the government, the regime, and the entire nation.

With his official doctrine of justicialismo, a name which stressed "social justice, along with the need for more reform, idealism, order and discipline, hierarchy, patriotism, and a sense of the heroic," Perón was able to initiate a program of politicization aimed at creating legitimacy for his regime and transmitting it into the system. But, justicialismo was vague and did not win Perón the necessary support to maintain the regime when it became impossible for the system to produce satisfactory outputs for the members of the political system. The military thus became discontented because the system was collapsing and their demands could not be met.

The failure of the system to generate satisfactory outputs may generally be attributed to the fact that Argentina ran out of foreign exchange. Perón got to the point where he could not satisfy anyone, not even his close friend, labor. He was forced to compromise one of the most important gifts of his revolution: dignity and self-respect. Ideology alone was not sufficient to see him through his economic difficulties and Perón was forced to curry the favor of the United States for a loan from the Export-Import Bank and, in an even more humiliating gesture, to ratify the Río de Janeiro Treaty on Reciprocal Aid. He followed this by passing an "investment law" in 1953 which welcomed foreign capital to Argentina in apparent renunciation of his former nationalization policy.

Even the tentative support given by the Church was withdrawn from the system when Perón launched an all-out attack in 1954 against the Church which cost his regime considerable public support. What Perón's quarrel with the Church reflected, in effect, was "his uneasiness over the continued existence of a traditional institution which still exercised influence among many people, also over the increasing civilian

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45 Lagos, op. cit., p. 160; see also Whitaker, Argentina, pp. 135-150.
46 Ibid., p. 142.
opposition organizing around the Christian Democratic Party." Censorship of the press, repudiation of the federal system, continuation of state of siege, purging of the teaching staff in the educational system, together with Perón’s constant play to organize labor under one umbrella, all spelled doom for the Peronist political system and the stable coalition that it hoped for.

The lesson to be learned from Perón’s experience is that it is very easy to clothe ideas associated with democratization, industrialization, rationalization and nation-building in the respectable garments of ideology and label it nationalism. A more appropriate label for such nationalism would perhaps be opportunism, the politically motivated ideology which is not oriented toward the building or enhancing of a nation’s status but rather to a philosophical rationale committed to derive the maximum political income from traditional value-orientations for the benefit of a closed elite. As Professor Fitzgibbon points out in his analysis of the Argentine revolution of '43:

The chief value of the justicialist dialectic was for internal consumption; it gave the movement (or so its leaders assumed) an appearance of genuineness.

It is difficult to avoid a charge of spuriousness against the Argentine revolution, especially now that it has been officially repudiated, but to stop with that is to oversimplify and sell short its character. Perón, its catalyst and spokesman, was unquestionably an opportunist. Argentina had, however, long been ripe for a revolt of the masses or at least a social reform which would alleviate the absurdly medieval conditions prevailing there. Perón simply captured the revolution. It would have been bound to occur sooner or later.

When Perón in 1955 modified his policy of economic nationalism to seek foreign aid to develop Argentine oil resources and cope with the general financial debacle of the period, he dealt a serious blow to the national pride of the Argentine people. One of the area’s major institutional groups, the military, spontaneously reacted with a brand of nationalism peculiar to the Argentines. It was somewhat the same brand of nationalism that triggered the removal from power of the once popular Irigoyen in 1930 and installed General José Uriburu until a Conservative president was elected with military support in 1932; it

48 Whitaker, Argentina, Chapter VIII.
was this same nationalism which would not tolerate the political instability of the late 1930's and the early 1940's, bringing about the downfall of Ramón Castillo in 1943, and eventually the coming to power of Juan Perón in 1946. This same strain of nationalism could also be detected in the successful military revolts against Arturo Frondizi in 1962 and Arturo Illia in 1966.

It should be noted that it is not unusual for officers of the armed forces in Latin America to take a strong stand as the guardians of the nationalism of their respective areas. In fact, as Professor Fitzgibbon tells us,

> The rise of nationalistic sentiment in many of the Latin American countries in the twentieth century . . . had its effect on the rôle of the Army. Armies sometimes became the self-appointed custodians of the new nationalism, the truest expression of the Geist of the particular nation. It must be the function and the responsibility of the Army to preserve the honor and dignity . . . of the country.

Actually, the role of the military has been influenced by a number of factors, but this is a topic which requires separate analysis. On balance it can be stated that the military has provided for Argentina an apparatus for decision-making which political parties, by reason of their inability to aggregate interests satisfactorily, have been unable to produce. Parties, Professor Almond tells us, are the instrument to aggregate interests. When this does not occur, an immobilized political system results. In other words, no one wishes to pick up the tab. The military has been picking up the tab in Argentina, and in all probability will continue to do so no matter what the price. It is sufficient to cite Professor Fitzgibbon: "... [the military] like the British sovereign, must be above the political battle, as it were, but unlike the king, always in a position to intervene if, in its own judgment, national dignidad were threatened either internally or externally."

This research effort clearly does not encompass other meaningful criteria indispensable to a fuller understanding of the enormously com-

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plex problem of nationalism in the Argentine context. In the main, the problem of nationalism has been discussed only superficially, suggesting certain complementary situations which point up or reflect what could be labeled a developmental syndrome of the processes of nationalism operating within the confines of a specific political culture.

**General Views of Argentine Nationalism**

It may be useful to indicate briefly some of the general views held on Argentine nationalism by such well-known authorities as Professors Whitaker, Blanksten, and Scobie. Professor Whitaker, for example, sketches the general pattern of Argentine nationalism according to three distinct periods:

In the first phase, which extended from the beginning of independence about 1810 to the turn of the century, Argentine nationalism was essentially introspective, liberal and benevolent save during the interlude of the Rosas tyranny in the 1830's and '40's; and at all times its chief function was to combat particularism and promote union. The second phase, from the 1890's to the 1940's, was marked increasingly by cultural and economic nationalism and xenophobia, combined with a growing concern for Argentina’s international role and, towards the close, an expansionist, aggressive spirit. The third phase, from the 1940's to the present, is more difficult to characterize, partly because it is so recent, but still more because of the fragmentation that Argentine society has suffered in the past generation. But the most distinctive trait of this period seems to be the trend towards harnessing nationalism to a social revolution in the interest of the masses — those called *descamisados* under the Perón regime.55

Professor Whitaker's historical pattern of nationalism in Argentina essentially points up, even if it does not corroborate, the all-important assumption alluded to in the early part of the paper that, while nationalism does play an important role in conditioning Argentine political behavior, it is difficult to characterize in terms of any one extant typology.

Professor Blanksten, on the other hand, sees Argentine nationalism as a special type of Latin American nationalism which corresponds to:

\[\ldots\] the European variety which was associated in the 1930's with Fascism and Nazism. This is a racist type of elitist doctrine \[\ldots\] geared to the class system \[\ldots\] [wherein] the people

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of the upper classes are urged to look upon their "white-ness" or "creole-ness" as involving a form of racial purity, and to regard themselves as inherently superior to the Indians and other lower classes.56

For Professor Scobie the general pattern of Argentine nationalism relates more tangibly to the general modernization and political development processes of the country. According to Scobie, Argentine nationalism is:

... a product of the twentieth century and of recent events in Argentine growth ... it emerged from the deliberate efforts in the schools to foster patriotism, the military service demanded of all young men, the unifying force of railroads, highways, newspapers, and radios, and the intellectual and middle-class concern with an Argentine ethos. Nationalism also had an economic basis: the rejection of what came to be viewed in the popular mind as foreign exploitation of the country's resources and wealth.57

It is difficult to integrate in one comprehensive model the variety of socializing experiences and influences which characterize Argentine nationalism. The reason, I would suggest, is because of the chameleon-like nature and empirical elusiveness of the concept of nationalism itself, whether examined in the Argentine context or in any other context for that matter. A specific statement relating to this point is made by Professor Leonard Binder:

Nationalism may have certain objective referents but historically cannot be shown to have had operative objective criteria. Neither language, religion, history, traditional culture, nor the implicit assumption of democracy have been shown to be the empirical source of nationalism.58

Nationalism

Nationalism in the Argentine context has been discussed as a manifestation of the political culture, the traditions, attitudes or patterns of behavior that condition political activity in the Argentine system. What has been said about nationalism in the Argentine situation may be summed up as follows: it tends to be multi-dimensional, diffuse, variable and situational in manifestation. It may appear, for example, in a messianic form embodying all the national consciousness and lofty

57 Scobie, Argentina, p. 216.
ideals of *argentinidad*. On the other hand, it may be viewed as an expression of the Port characterized by dichotomous interests, internecine strife, insular negativism and general schizophrenic tendencies in matters relating to the formulating of national goals and purpose. It is also possible to observe Argentine nationalism emerging in its Peronist, Fascist-like form as the opportunistic ideology of an elite. Another pattern of Argentine nationalism and perhaps a concomitant of the ideological tendency just described is to be found in connection with the role of the military which, although far from monolithic and unchanging, nevertheless has as its general goal the preservation of what may be labeled national dignity and the enforcement of an ambivalent brand of constitutionalism.

What has been stressed in the preceding paragraphs are but broad characteristics of certain aspects of the Argentine syndrome of nationalism as it appears in the setting of the Argentine political culture. We are reminded that Argentine nationalism is widespread and ebullient but, like the political behavior of the Argentines themselves, difficult to typify, for, as José Luis Romero indicated some years ago, “the collective personality of the country is still in process of formation.”

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