Argentina: Tangos and Cafes

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Ser algo que nadie puede definir... un argentino.
—Jorge Luis Borges

To be something that nobody can define, an Argentine.

Although Argentina is the largest Spanish-speaking South American (SSSA) nation, bordering half the countries of the region, many contend that it does not truly belong where it is geographically situated. They say that it should be in Europe instead. Judging by surface appearances, this seems to be true. The populace* is the second most “European” of the SSSAs both ethnically and culturally, leading to a popular description of an Argentine as “someone who gestures like an Italian, talks like a Spaniard, is educated like a French person, and copies British fashion.” The nation’s capital, Buenos Aires, is commonly referred to as the “Paris of the Americas” because of its notable resemblance to the Gallic city.

* Actually, Uruguay has the most European populace, with Argentina following closely behind. Throughout this chapter, many comments made about the Argentines also apply to the Uruguayans, since the two nations have much in common both ethnically and culturally due to similar historical experiences. Nonetheless, there are significant, and noteworthy, differences between them as well, particularly in the political arena (see chapter 17, “Uruguay: The Buffer State,” for more details).
More familiarity with the nation and its people begins to reveal the fallacy of this widely held supposition. Argentina today is definitely not a European country, and the belief (or, for some, fervent hope) that it has played a key role in its current woes, inciting a seemingly perpetual identity crisis at both the micro- and macrolevels. It also serves to make the country among the most puzzling and enigmatic of the region; many of the events that appear to spring spontaneously from Argentine soil surprise and, at times, appall observers and participants alike.

The Argentine saga seems almost unbelievable. How could a country with some of the most fertile lands anywhere and a populace that is among the best educated in the region fare so badly? Many economists, political scientists, and sociologists have thrown up their hands in defeat trying to “fit” the Argentine phenomenon into any conventional model. Even the Argentines, among the most articulate of the SSSAs, find it a tall task to make sense of their own homeland. Perhaps the legion of acclaimed Argentine writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Sabato, and Adolfo Bioy Casares, come closest in their myriad stories of apparently fantastic dimensions. As one literary critic put it, “to write fantasy literature in Argentina is the surest way to present reality” (Teitelbaum 1998, 97). Consider the following:

- Argentina began the twentieth century with a per capita income higher than Canada but finished it with a per capita income on a par with Chile's.
- Despite the fact that Argentines (along with the Uruguayans) are the best educated and have the largest middle class of the SSSAs, a peaceful transfer of political power between two civilizations of differing parties did not occur in twentieth-century Argentina until the 1980s.
- Argentines number among the most secular and least religiously devout of the SSSA nations; nonetheless, their way of relating to important national figures often borders on the reverential, as can be noted in their treatment of the Peróns as well as many other individuals throughout their history.

How can we approximate a more incisive understanding of both the glamour and the pain that is Argentina? In this chapter, we will make an attempt, looking at the geographic and regional influences, keys to Argentinean culture (including the theater of life, the tango, and the zero-sum game), communication patterns, and the Argentine workplace.

Geographic and Regional Influences

The eighth largest nation in the world, Argentina is truly a land of superlatives within whose continental borders can be found a wide variety of terrain and climatic conditions. If its alleged Antarctic territory is also included, which ostensibly extends all the way to the South Pole, then there is even greater diversity.

The country's northeastern regions are sultry and humid, with rivers a prime feature. Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil all claimed this area in earlier eras, and it was the site of several belligerent confrontations, including the infamous War of the Triple Alliance. These days, however, the three neighbors cooperate in numerous ways, including sharing access to the world-famous Iguaçu Falls as well as to the electricity generated at the enormous Itaipú Dam located nearby.

Argentina's western flank is dominated by the soaring peaks of the Andes Mountains, the second highest mountain chain in the world. Its long border with Chile is delineated by the highest points of these mountains, which serve as a looming barrier between the two neighbors, reinforcing separateness rather than commonality. Located just inside the Argentine border is Mount Aconcagua, the tallest mountain in all the Americas.

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Argentina, along with neighboring Chile, both claim large wedges of the Antarctic, based on their geographic proximity. Argentina has gone so far as to arrange for a woman to give birth at their base, thus enabling them to say that Argentina is the only nation to date that has had a national actually born in the "white continent."
The country's northwestern corner abuts Bolivia. These two nations, which seem so different, were in fact jointly ruled during the colonial era. Previous to the European incursions, this was part of the Inca empire, and even today there is a larger percentage of indigenous people here than anywhere else in the nation.

Argentina's southern realms have a markedly different physiognomy; Patagonia and, below it, Tierra del Fuego are flat and low-lying, a windswept and frigid domain that seems to bring out the hardness in both people and wildlife. The southernmost city in the world, Ushuaia, is located here, as is the only continually moving glacier in South America, Perito Moreno. Although sparsely populated, this area has been a bone of contention between Chile and Argentina for more than a century; the two countries almost went to war over control of a part of it as recently as the 1980s. Luckily, such parrying appears to be a thing of the past since recent diplomatic initiatives have resolved all the outstanding border disputes to the satisfaction of both parties.

Despite Argentina's incredible geographic diversity, for many the nation is synonymous with the pampas, those grassy prairies located smack in the center of the country. These lands, among the most fertile in the world, make up only about one-quarter of the national territory but are the home of three-quarters of all the Argentines, about twenty-seven million people. The pampas are also the country's greatest treasure. The livestock and crops that flourish here are Argentina's most important source of revenue, as they have been ever since cattle and horses were first introduced during the early colonial period. However, the significance of the pampas extends far beyond the demographic and economic. These lands seem to have worked themselves into the Argentinean soul, and it is truly impossible to understand the contemporary Argentines without taking these seemingly endless and forever bountiful lands into consideration.

At the most basic level, the Argentines seem to personify the pampas' spaciousness in their own communication style; they are renowned for their wide gait, uninhibited movements, and straightforward gazes. Argentines' eating habits also reflect the abundance of the pampas; they are the greatest consumers of beef anywhere, and many claim that Argentinean beef is the best in the world. The Argentines' carnivorous diet seems to affect their physiognomy, making them taller and broader on average than most other SSSAs, characteristics that may contribute to their resounding success in soccer and other competitive sports. Unfortunately, Argentines also have high rates of digestive disorders and heart disease, which many claim are due to their dietary patterns.

Some allege that the apparent limitlessness of both the land and the sky in the pampas imbues the Argentines with the sense of solitude one feels as an apparently minuscule human dwarfed by the dimensions of the terrain. As Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, in his seminal work, X-Ray of the Pampa, puts it,

> The vastness of the horizon, which always looks the same as we advance, as if the whole plain moved along with us, gives one the impression of something illusory in this rude reality of the open country. Here prairie is expanse, and expanse seems to be nothing more than the unfolding of the infinite within, a colloquy of the traveler with God…. It is the pampa, the land where man is alone, like an abstract being that will begin anew the story of the species—or conclude it. (1971, 7)

This metaphysical inclination is expressed through secular queries and a deep-seated search for some sort of meaning and purpose in life that extends beyond the material. As a general rule, Argentines are natural philosophers, and nearly all have an ability to express abstract ideas with a force and clarity that astound many an outsider. Indeed, some of the most thought-provoking Spanish-language writers of various genres are Argentines. One of them, Ernesto Sábato, wrote, "The weight of the infinitude of the pampa invites one to create myths, like the Russian steppe" (Teitelbaum, 261).
Some claim that this metaphysical tendency can be carried to an extreme, making many Argentines more concerned with the abstract and supreal than with the concrete realities of their own daily life. One such critic is the acclaimed Argentine author Julio Cortazar, who described the main character in his renowned novel *Hopscotch* as follows: “He would not defend himself with the rapid and anxious accumulation of culture, the favorite dodge of the Argentine middle class to avoid facing national reality, or any other reality for that matter, and to think [of] themselves as safe from the emptiness surrounding them” (Cortazar 1966, 19).

Another criticism commonly raised regarding the pampas’ influence on the Argentine people is that their sheer fertility is as much a curse as a blessing, inculcating a sense that resources can be had without excessive exertion of time or effort, which leads many to opt for the easy way. After all, if a decent living can be had by partaking of the pampas’ abundance, then why work any harder? This nonchalant attitude toward work and planning helps to explain, at least in part, why the pampas have never been as efficiently or productively exploited as they could be.

On the eastern fringe of the pampas, fronting the Atlantic Ocean, is the province of Buenos Aires, the most populated and economically important of the country’s twenty-three provinces. The city of Buenos Aires is the nation’s capital, with a population of twelve million, which makes it not only the most important city in the nation but also the biggest city in SSSA and the tenth largest in the world. Despite its size, the city feels spacious and open, like the pampas; its principal avenue, the 9 de Mayo, is reputed to be the widest in the world, measuring 450 meters (1,476 feet) across. The city was justifiably named for the *buenos aires* (good airs) that blow through it. Despite urban traffic and congestion, there is little pollution.

What Buenos Aires does have is humidity, due to its location on the sea and its proximity to the Río de la Plata. This all-important river marks the city’s northern boundary, and it seems to mirror the pampas’ expanses, since it is the widest river in the world. Even on the clearest of days, it is impossible to see the opposite shore, where the Uruguayan city of Colonia is located.

Buenos Aires’ port location has played a key role in much of the city’s and, indeed, the nation’s history. In popular language, the residents of Buenos Aires are nearly always referred to as *porteños*, from the Spanish for “port,” which is *puerto*. Like many other port city residents, porteños are famed for their openness to foreign ideas and peoples, cosmopolitan ways, and fast pace. Many also contend that porteños can be pompous and snobbish; actually, porteños are probably the least liked group in the continent, and jokes abound regarding their alleged self-aggrandizing ways.

Many associate the Argentine exclusively with the porteño, a stereotype that does not do justice to the Argentines’ linguistic and cultural diversity but does reflect quite accurately national dynamics, for the porteños are wont to exert their power over the *provincianos* (people from the provinces). This dynamic began in the early colonial era, when Buenos Aires was designated capital of the newly created Viceroyalty of Río de la Plata in 1776. Previously, the entire area had been a dependency of far-off Peru, and all trade had to be conducted through Lima, a policy that favored the interior cities and encouraged a booming contraband trade along the Atlantic coast. When Buenos Aires became the capital and the city began to prosper, many of the elites from the interior regions began to resent this upstart city and its inhabitants who were eclipsing their power. Independence intensified these tensions, and centralist forces and regional strongmen fought bitterly for nearly half a century until the issue was finally resolved in favor of Buenos Aires.

Today, power and control in Argentina are apparently quite centralized; the issue of regionalism has not reared its head for more than a century. Nonetheless, the extended conflict, with its accompanying distrust and even dislike between porteños and provincianos, is one of the causes for contemporary Argentina’s
notably weak sense of "nationhood." While there are certain specific events such as World Cup soccer that serve to unite the Argentines, at a more fundamental level the Argentine people are not sure what exactly it means to be an Argentine and often find it extremely challenging to figure out how to work together for the betterment of their nation.

**Keys to Understanding the Argentines**

**The Theater of Life**

The saying "Life is but a stage" fits Argentina perfectly, since much of its national history seems to be a series of vignettes of heroic and, oftentimes, tragic dimensions with charismatic leading characters. The Argentine people, for the most part, have often gravitated, whether in admiration or loathing or perhaps a combination of the two, to these strong personalities, as if searching for something that transcends the merely mundane in their connection with these seemingly "superhuman" figures. This penchant for the theatrical is concretely demonstrated in a deep and abiding love for the theater and cinema that characterizes most Argentines. Sometimes, the boundary between the actual stage and the national stage is hard to define.

Such theatricality began even before Argentina was a nation. During the colonial era, the nascent Argentines successfully defended themselves against British incursions in 1806. Empowered by their victory, they were the first to declare their independence from Spain. Led by General José de San Martín, the nation's greatest hero, the Argentines won their independence and then moved on to help Chile and Peru with their struggles.

In the newly won Argentinean terrains, three very different groups coexisted, oftentimes uneasily: the landed aristocracy, the gauchos, and the Indians. The owners of large landholdings had enormous ranches, known as estancias, which could reach thousands or even, in some cases, hundreds of thousands of acres in size, many having been granted as rewards for military actions. Most of these elite landholders tried to extract as much from their rural holdings as possible with the least personal expenditure of energy, opting, when feasible, to spend their time in Buenos Aires or, better yet, Europe, enmeshed in the affairs of high society. The Spaniard José Ortega y Gasset made the following comment, based on his observations of some of these Argentine aristocrats in the Old World: "The Argentine is a marvelously gifted man... who has never devoted himself to the activity he carries out, who has never accepted it as his vital goal, who never considers it to be definitive but a rather transitory stage on the way to his ideal: advancement in wealth and social status" (1983, 188). It is said that many contemporary Argentines, whatever their social status, exhibit this characteristic, dedicating themselves more to a sophisticated social life than to hard work.

The gauchos who resided in the unfenced regions had a very different lifestyle—an almost nomadic existence, unfettered by possessions and even family in many cases. The wild horses and cattle that proliferated in the pampas provided the gauchos with nearly everything they needed: transport, sustenance, and even shelter. Corn, when available, and the ever-present yerba mate, or "mate tea," augmented their predominantly carnivorous diet. Each gaucho was truly a law unto himself, shunning restrictions or rules of any type:

...independent, brave, athletic, a bold warrior, and loyal... Of all these idealized qualities, personal independence was perhaps the most important—acting solely of one's own free will and being willing to stand up and take the consequences. To take orders from somebody else was considered undignified and weak." (1999, 2, www.invertir.com/argentina)

Although present-day Argentina was not heavily populated at the time of the Spaniards' arrival, there were at least ten different Indian tribes inhabiting the region. In fact, the first European attempts to settle Argentina were roundly thwarted by the local Indians, and it took several expeditions before the area that was to become Buenos Aires was successfully colonized.
Even centuries later, during the independence era, Indians made up about half of the entire Argentine populace; recent scholars have suggested that the original gauchos probably spoke the Indian language Guaraní as their mother tongue. Today, very few of these Argentine Indians survive, fewer than 100,000 in total. While some merged into the mainstream populace through mestizaje, many more were exterminated in the nineteenth century by caudillos and their gaucho soldiers, who sought to “free” the lands of Indians so that they could be more “productively used.”

Despite their active participation in the Indian campaigns, by the late nineteenth century the gauchos were faring only a little better than the Native Americans, usually being looked on with disdain by their more settled contemporaries. The increasing encroachment of “civilization” into the outlying parts of the pampas occasioned the demise of the gauchos’ freewheeling ways. Some remained in the rural areas, adjusting their lifestyle by becoming more “settled cowboys,” while others drifted to the cities where they eked out a meager living, oftentimes as butchers at the many slaughterhouses.

Today, the gaucho memory is revered much more than the actual gaucho ever was in his heyday. He is the central character of national folklore and is oftentimes presented in a very romanticized way, lauded for all that he was once criticized for. The gaucho’s independent ways and his disdain for any type of authority are commonly cited as his most enduring characteristics, and many contemporary Argentines, most of whom have no gaucho ancestry, nonetheless seem to manifest a similar inclination to exert their will whenever possible, oftentimes with little regard for rules and their enforcement. In contrast with most other SSAs, Argentines, for the most part, shun taking orders and will try to make it appear, whenever possible, that they take orders from no one, even if the actual reality may be quite different. Argentine sociologist Guillermo O’Donnell has dubbed this the “intolerable equality of Argentine society” and uses the example of traffic behavior to demonstrate how it works.

In the United States, traffic lights are respected and the general rule of entering a busy intersection is that the driver who arrives there first, enters first. In Argentina, in contrast...the rule is that if there is no policeman in sight, each person should go first, which involves impeding that the other person passes...the result is that the cars that are crossing advance until they almost crash...taking advantage of the most minimum vacillation...to enter the onslaught...resulting in monumental inefficiency, fights, insults and other crude gestures. (1985, 10)

During the same period that many Indians and gauchos were meeting their demise, a new and very different character entered the Argentine scene: the European immigrant. The increased exploitation of the pampas, combined with technological changes that enabled Argentine beef to reach European markets, fueled an economic boom that propelled the country into the ranks of the wealthiest of the world. For many Europeans, relatively sparsely populated and increasingly prosperous Argentina functioned like a magnet, drawing them to try their luck. Between 1857 and 1926, more than six million such immigrants arrived in Argentina. Italians, primarily from northern Italy, composed the largest group, numbering about three million, followed by the Spaniards, at about two million. The remainder was made up of numerous nationalities including Polish, Turkish, French, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and German.

Many arrived hoping to acquire land in the pampas, but most found that despite the country’s vast expanses, there was little to be had, since most of the best land had already been apportioned. Interestingly, the immigrant group that had the most success obtaining rural holdings was the Jews. Prior to the rise of Zionism, influential Western European Jews, spearheaded by the Rothschild family, had the idea of creating Jewish agricultural colonies where there were “empty lands” to provide a new and more secure home for some of the Eastern European Jews then encountering severe antisemitism. Various sites around the world were considered, and Argentina was selected as the best. Jewish philanthropic organizations purchased large tracts at various sites...
in Argentina, and European Jews soon began arriving at these agricultural colonies, leading to the incongruous phenomenon of Yiddish-speaking gauchos! Several of these colonies functioned successfully for decades; over time, however, most of the colonists and/or their offspring ended up moving to the cities, where many became professionals. Today, there are more than half a million Jews in Argentina, giving the country the largest Jewish population in SSSA and one of the most significant in the world.

The vast majority of the newcomers ended up in the cities, especially Buenos Aires, which had a population that was over three-quarters foreign-born during the height of the immigration. One can imagine what Buenos Aires must have been like during this era, with its polyglot of languages, teeming tenements, and interface of cultures. These immigrants, for the most part, had a very different attitude toward life and work than the native Argentines did; they were desirous of improving their lot and willing to work long hours at whatever work was available to achieve their goals. Aristotle Onassis was one of the luckier ones; his initial fortune was made in Argentina as a youthful Greek immigrant.

Even though only half of the immigrants, about three million in total, remained permanently in Argentina, at the time they far outstripped the number of native-born Argentines, which was only about one and a half million. In concrete terms, this meant that Argentina during the heyday of immigration inflows had a population that was decidedly more than one-half foreign-born, a percentage that far surpasses anything that ever occurred in the United States.

The impact of these Europeans on Argentina cannot be overemphasized; they transformed the country in many ways, playing a large role in forging the modern-day nation. Through both demographics and hard work, the immigrants contributed to making Argentina the primarily middle-class society that it is today. After Uruguay, Argentina has the flattest social structure in the region, and social mobility occurs more often here than in most of the rest of the region. The nation’s strong public education system, which reaches all the way to the university, was created primarily at the urging of the immigrants. It has helped many talented youth “rise up” from meager family circumstances to positions of importance.

The European influence can be noted in many other aspects of Argentine life and culture—in the nation’s architecture and urban layouts, for one. Most Argentine cities and towns, most notably Buenos Aires, look and feel much like France, Spain, or northern Italy. And just like Mediterranean Europe, cafes are omnipresent throughout Argentina, no matter the size of the city or town. These public places for meeting and chatting are usually chock-full of people simultaneously sipping coffee, oftentimes smoking, and discussing politics, art, philosophy, and life in general.

Of all the immigrant groups, Italians predominate; their influence is most notable in contemporary Argentina, which some claim almost seems like a transplanted Italy. Like the Italians, the Argentines are renowned for their sense of style, and Buenos Aires is considered the fashion capital of the region. Image is important here, and both men and women are known for the attention they give to personal appearance and presentation. Also like the Italians, the Argentines have a deep appreciation and reverence for the arts in all forms. The Italian influence is ever present in the national cuisine as well. Almost as ubiquitous as beef are pastas, pizzas, and Italian-style pastries and gelatos.

Some say that the Italian flair can even be seen in the nature of male-female relationships: Argentine men can be quite assertive in their pursuit of women, and are renowned as true romantics. They are also typically more willing to roll up their sleeves and help with the cooking than many other SSSA males are.

Although the local elite welcomed the sorely needed labor provided by the immigrants, they were nonetheless deeply concerned about the impact of these “hordes” on the nation, especially in the political arena. They were most worried about the supposedly radical ideas of the newly transplanted Europeans,
many of whom were indeed familiar with the ideas of communism, socialism, and anarchism that were then in vogue among some sectors in Europe. As a consequence, the local Argentines prohibited all immigrants from participating in the nation’s political life and strongly opposed the formation of any kind of labor organization. This meant that at least half of the productive adult population had no legitimate political channels through which to articulate their concerns, an outcome that contrasted sharply with what was happening in Uruguay, where under the leadership of President José y Ordoñez Batlle the nation became the continent’s first welfare state, and in Chile, which had strong unions and leftist parties.

This disturbing reality goes far in explaining the phenomenon of Juan Domingo Perón, the most significant as well as the most controversial character in twentieth-century Argentina. The Perón saga is so spellbinding and, at times, so seemingly implausible that it has provided the raw material for many a story, novel, and play; the most well known, is, of course, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical Evita.

Perón came from the military ranks. He emerged into national prominence in 1944, when he parlayed his supposedly unimportant position as Minister of Labor during a period of military rule into a personal power base by permitting labor to organize under his banner, thus ensuring their unflinching support. He rapidly became so popular among the marginalized sectors of Argentine society that all efforts to stall his rise to power, which included jailing him, proved ineffectual. In 1946, he was democratically elected president. During his term, he accomplished a considerable amount: changing the direction of national policy, stressing indigenous industrialization, and focusing government attention and resources primarily on the lower classes in the urban areas. Organized labor swelled in number from 400,000 when he took office to more than four million only three years later.

His new wife, former actress Evita Duarte, had a higher profile than most presidents’ wives. She dedicated herself to helping the disenfranchised, whom she called the desemasiados (shirtless ones), in a way revenging herself for the taunts she had received as an illegitimate child of humble origin. The couple’s popularity came to border on the religious, and many considered them saintlike. Their critics were equally vociferous in their condemnation.

Perón handily won reelection in 1951, but his military supporters thwarted his bid for Evita to be his vice president. A year later, before she was even thirty, Evita died of cancer.† Perón’s power declined from then on until he was removed by a military coup in 1955, by which time he had been excommunicated by the Catholic Church and discredited by many of his former supporters. By the time he was exiled, national revenues had fallen by about 70 percent during his nine-year tenure as president.

Despite his downfall from power and clear personal transgressions, Perón still remained wildly popular among many segments of Argentine society, leading to an ideological battle between those desirous of bringing Perón and his kind back to power and those bent on eradicating all traces of Peronism from Argentine society. A stalemate of sorts ensued. Attempts were made to call elections, but the Peronists, who were still the strongest political force in the nation despite their leader’s exit, prohibited them from occurring. When the desired elections did not take place, Perón’s opponents, who numbered among many of the Argentine elite as well as the military, intervened to “stabilize” the situation.

Finally, after two decades of such maneuvering, a decision was made to legalize the Peronist party and invite Perón himself back from exile in Spain. The intention on the part of his opponents was that the “real” Perón would finally disillusion his many and

† Evita’s remains were embalmed, and their location changed several times for fear of the formation of a cult. The remains finally ended up in a cemetery in Europe, their location revealed only when one of the individuals involved in the transfer told the truth on his deathbed. Finally, Evita’s remains were returned to Argentina and were reburied in the nation’s most renowned cemetery, Recoleta. For a fascinating book on this macabre subject, see Santa Evita by Tomás Eloy Martínez.
increasingly ideologically diverse supporters, thus providing the
framework for finally ridding the nation of Peronism once and
for all. Perón returned to Argentina in the early 1970s with his
third wife, dancer Isabel Martínez, and handily won the 1973
election with more than 70 percent of the vote. This time he
got his way, and Isabel was designated his vice president. The
ironic twist is that this time Perón was the one to die, just a
short time after his victory.

Isabel took over the reins of Argentina, to become the first
woman president in South American history. Unfortunately, she
proved disastrously inept, with none of Evita’s political savvy;
her astrologer/adviser Jose Lopez Rega was the true power behind
the scenes. During her short period as president, Argentina liter-
ally began to fall apart; inflation hit 335 percent and guerrilla
violence increased dramatically. Finally, on March 25, 1976, a
coup toppled Isabel’s government.

Perón is not the only twentieth-century Argentine politi-
cal figure to engender both love and loathing. Argentine-born
Ernesto (Che) Guevara, the communist guerrilla and Castro’s
right-hand man who died in Bolivia during his ill-fated attempt
to start a continental revolution, is another such mythic figure.
His face can still be seen, decades after his youthful “martyr-
dom,” emblazoned on many a poster, T-shirt, and on street graffiti
throughout the world, and he is considered a true hero by many,
whatever their actual political inclination may be.

Despite their ideological differences, both Perón and Guevara
(though the latter fought under the Cuban banner) illustrate a
very Argentine perspective on international affairs, which is that
the region would do much better without the intervention and
interference of outside powers, particularly the United States,
whose inter-American policies have been and are still consid-
ered heavy-handed and self-serving. Accompanying this is the
sense, or perhaps hope, that the Argentines themselves, due to
their nation’s size and level of development, should assume the
mantle of regional leadership. This widely supported viewpoint
helps to explain many of the actions of the country’s leaders in
the international arena over the decades, including the enmity
of many of Argentina’s leaders toward U.S. policies and plans
for Latin America, the nation’s program for developing nuclear
weapons, and its recent participation in MERCOSUR, the re-
geonal free trade zone for the Southern Cone nations.

The Tango

For many Argentines, the most revered twentieth-century hero
was not a politician, but a showman: tango singer Carlos Gardel,
whose mysterious origins (some say he was born in France, while
others contend he was Uruguayan by birth) and tragic death in
an airplane crash at the height of his fame added to his mythic
stature. This veneration seems most appropriate because the
tango is so symbolic of Argentine culture.

The tango’s origins reflect the nation’s eclectic history. Its
first appearance was in the brothels and other locations of ill
repute in Buenos Aires and Montevideo; its unique sounds and
rhythm were shaped by a variety of musical influences, includ-
ing the Cuban habanero (a genre brought by Caribbean sailors
who passed through the port), the music played by the local
black Argentines known as candombe, the gaucho milonga sung
in the rural areas, and the German concertina-like bandoneon
instrument. The first tangos were solely instrumental and usu-
ally danced by two males or by a male with a female paid to
accompany him. Most “decent” Argentines shunned this music
as well as the people who played and danced it. All this changed
in 1911, however, when the tango was introduced in Europe,
where it became the rage. By this time lyrics and orchestral ac-
companiment had been added. Once the Europeans fell for the
tango, mainstream Argentines began to reappraise it and soon
embraced it as their own.

More than a century after its birth, tango music’s popularity is
still increasing not only in Argentina but throughout the world.
There are dance schools on all continents dedicated to the teach-
ing of its rather demanding footwork, so “Argentine” with its
stylistic flair and slightly jaded air. The melancholic tonalities of
the songs, with their common theme of loss—lost loves, lost hope, even lost lives—seem to poignantly express the Argentinean pathos. As Jorge Luis Borges put it, “I come from a sad country.”

The Zero-Sum Game

Indeed, the Argentine people have much to feel sad about at both a personal and a collective level, due in large part to their own choices, which have been heavily influenced over the centuries by a “zero-sum attitude,” a winner-take-all mentality in which all sides believe that they hold the “exclusive truth.” Not infrequently, those in power have attempted to convince others with differing perspectives of “the truth” through strong-arm measures, leading to confrontational and often bloody clashes. As Alicia Frohmann, herself an Argentine of immigrant German-Jewish parents, puts it, “Argentina has an underlying violent streak that is terrible…it is hard to explain or put into words” (author interview 2000).

This approach reached its apogee during the eight-year period of military rule (1976 to 1984) that succeeded the overthrow of Isabel Perón. During these years the various military heads of state in their quest for a permanent solution to the nation’s problems of hyperinflation, political instability, and homegrown groups using guerrilla tactics, waged war against all their opponents with a ruthlessness unmatched by any of the other authoritarian regimes then reigning in much of the region. While exact figures are hard to come by, somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 Argentines, mostly young people between the ages of twenty and thirty-five, lost their lives during this period of terror. Innumerable others were arrested and tortured and/or had to flee into exile.

It was in Argentina that the Spanish word desaparecidos, which means “disappeared,” began to take on a specific meaning to describe individuals who were arrested by military forces and never seen again, with no trace of their whereabouts or remains. Many of the desaparecidos could never be located because they had been unceremoniously pushed from military aircraft into the cavernous Río de la Plata. While their physical bodies may be missing, memories of them are not. The mothers and grandmothers of many peacefully parade every Thursday morning, as they have for more than two decades, in front of the Casa Rosada, the Argentine presidential palace, asking what happened to their loved ones. Argentine Adolfo Pérez Esquivel received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts on behalf of the many victims of this “internal war on subversion.”

The Argentine military did not stop at defeating their internal enemies; they also turned their gaze outward, setting their sights on the long-contested Malvinas/Falkland Islands located two hundred miles off Argentina’s coast but populated by staunch Brits known as Kelpers, most of whom originally came to these rather remote islands during the whaling era. Grossly miscalculating their international support and their own military prowess, the junta leaders launched an attack on the islands in the early 1980s, only to find themselves rapidly embroiled in a direct war with the United Kingdom. This time, in striking contrast to the colonial era outcome, the Argentines were soundly defeated, with over a thousand enlisted soldiers’ deaths a tragic consequence.

While the military’s blatant excesses seem to have insured the Argentines against new attempts at nondemocratic governance, a winner-take-all mentality nonetheless persists in the nation today, manifested primarily in the economic arena. Even though the country has far less corruption than neighboring Paraguay, payoffs and other types of shady financial transactions (such as not paying taxes, depositing undeclared capital in overseas accounts, speculating on the basis of insider knowledge, and using personal connections for profit) are nonetheless widespread, particularly on the part of those in positions of power. These Machiavellian maneuvers have played a large role in the nation’s current economic woes.

The greatest irony of all is that this zero-sum attitude of key players over the course of Argentina’s history has produced exactly what Argentines most feared: shrinking available revenues
and fewer resources for all, an apparent anomaly in this land of plenty. Over the course of the twentieth century, Argentina fell from the sixth largest economy in 1924 to 63rd place in 2002, according to the Global Competitiveness Report of 2002–2003, a decline unmatched by any other nation. One Argentine comic has half-jokingly proposed that one possible solution to the nation’s current economic crisis might be to hire themselves out as consultants on how not to run a country!

This harsh reality propels Argentines these days to look inward and to examine themselves as a people and a nation as they try to figure out what went wrong in the past and what might be done better in the future. The vast majority are deeply concerned and pessimistic regarding both their own future and their children’s. This is especially true for many members of the large middle class, who have seen themselves slipping downward and don’t know what to do to halt this slide. As someone said, the problem with contemporary Argentina is that it “has the income of the lower class and the taste of the upper class.” This discontent and anomie may explain the exceedingly high rate of psychiatric visits in Argentina, reputed to be the highest in the world. Argentina also leads the SSSA nations in the number of suicides, a figure that has, not surprisingly, increased in recent decades.

Due to the many problems besetting their country, many children and grandchildren of immigrants who once left Europe to try their fortune in a more promising Argentina now want nothing more than to leave, oftentimes returning to the homelands of their ancestors. Others have chosen to forge new paths; in this regard the United States is a particularly popular destination. These days, the Miami area is chock-full of Argentines. Tomás Eloy Martínez, himself an Argentine residing in the U.S., describes this phenomenon: “We live jumping towards the outside world, leaving, which implies that whatever is within is inhospitable, hostile or, at the least, repels us. In fact, one of the few manifestations we seem to have of being Argentinean is, precisely, this uncomfortable feeling towards our own homeland” (1999, 17).

Communication Patterns

Argentine communication modes reflect much of the nation’s history and cultural patterns. There is a marked theatricality in how many of the Argentines speak and gesture. Argentines also attempt to bring down barriers rather than erect them when conversing with others, in contrast with most of the other SSSAs. This reflects the nation’s relatively middle-class social structure as well as its gaucho penchant for equality. Probably the best approach to understanding Argentinian communication patterns is to consider how conversations unfold at cafes, since much of the best of Argentine life transpires in these locales. Argentines are, for the most part, open and friendly in their linguistic style. “The Spanish of the Argentine is that of confidence, of the discussed friendship” (Argambide 1996, 104). Whenever possible, the informal rather than the formal second-person pronoun is used, even between people of different social classes and positions. In fact, one of the most distinguishing features of Argentine Spanish is an idiosyncratic variation of the informal you. Instead of using tú, they (along with the Uruguayans and Paraguayans to a lesser extent) employ vos, modifying the verb declination as follows: the standard Spanish tú tienes (you have), becomes vos tenés.

Argentine Spanish has many other unique features. Due to the strong immigrant presence in Argentina, the contemporary language has incorporated some of the tonalities and even vocabulary of its myriad European ancestors. Not surprisingly, the Italian influence is most notable. Argentine Spanish has the lift and musicality of the Italian language as well as some of its flamboyance. Argentines, for the most part, are extroverted and demonstrative when they speak, and their voices are often a notch louder than many other SSSAs. There are some pronunciation differences as well. For instance, the letters y and ll

§ This form is a much-modified adaptation of an relatively archaic term vosotros, which was originally used as a formal second-person plural pronoun in Classical Spanish.
are said with an "sh" sound, rather than the typical "y" sound employed in the rest of the Spanish-speaking world.

There is even a special type of slang, known as lunfardo, that is characteristic of the porteños, although other Argentines also employ it. Lunfardo was created more than a century ago by urban riffians to communicate their illicit activities without more law-abiding folks understanding them. They took terms from many of the languages then spoken in the tenements, including Genoese, French, and Yiddish, and oftentimes reversed the order of words to increase their cryptographic nature. In time lunfardo was adopted by mainstream Argentines for colloquial use, and today there are entire dictionaries dedicated to lunfardo, which is continually changing with the addition of newly coined words and phrases. One of the newest is tracho, which was first used to describe a pirated CD or computer game but has now become a common term to describe a corrupt politician or businessman.

There are many other uniquely Argentine words. Perhaps the most well known is ché, which is hard to translate accurately. It is employed as an exclamation in a variety of circumstances: to indicate interest, exasperation, and/or a desire to get attention. Another typical Argentine word that reveals much about the nature of life in the country is bronca.

An Italo-Spanish fusion, like most Argentines themselves, the word bronca implied a fury so dangerously contained as to end in ulcers. People felt bronca when they waited for an hour to be served at a bank, and then the service was bad because the cashiers all had bronca too.... Everyone had bronca. [Even] the weather, with its cruel regime of heat and thunderstorms, had bronca. (France 1999, 58–59)

Living and Working in Argentina

While it is possible that some sojourners to Argentina will have episodes of bronca during their stay, occasioned by some of the complexities of daily life in the country, nonetheless the many positive aspects of life there will most likely more than compen-
sate. Since Argentina is such an immigrant society, Argentines are more comfortable than many other SSSAs interfacing with peoples of different cultural backgrounds and linguistic skills; consequently, one feels less conspicuous there than in most of the rest of the region. In addition, Argentines often treat foreigners, at least those from English-speaking North America (ESNA) and Europe, better than their own compatriots, so some of the more trying aspects of Argentine society impact foreigners less than they do the natives themselves.

Argentines usually make a clearer distinction between visitors (based on nationality) than many other SSSAs do, and they are nearly always extremely well versed in the politics and cultures of other peoples and places. They typically call citizens from the United States "yanquis," pronounced "yanquis." This term can be used both pejoratively or, as is more common, in a friendly way. People from other parts of the English-speaking world are usually addressed based on their national affiliation, such as canadiense, australiano, and the like.

Another arena in which the Argentines clearly demonstrate their sophistication is in their survival skills. Due to the numerous crises that have beset the country in recent years, nearly all have a finely honed ability to figure out how to best cope with whatever reality the nation is currently encountering and how to work the system to their own advantage. People planning to live and work in Argentina are well advised to acquire some of this Argentine savvy as soon as possible upon arrival. They should also acquire some knowledge regarding the fine line between paying tips to expedite matters (propinas), which is legal under Argentine law, and bribing (coimas), which is not, (but is nonetheless not uncommon in some circles). If a foreign businessperson has any doubts in this regards, it is always best to seek local advice.

Another distinctive feature of life in this largest SSSA country is the greater stress on individualism here than in most of the rest of the region, a cultural attribute that holds true in both the domestic and the business realms. Cross-cultural studies have
corroborated this reality. This means that Argentine employees, for the most part, are more comfortable working on their own and pursuing individual rather than group goals than are many of the other SSSAs.

Despite these cultural differences between the Argentines and others from the region, in many ways the Argentines are similar to their neighbors. Hierarchy is still important in the workplace, albeit to a lesser extent perhaps than in other places on the continent. For instance, it is not customary for higher management to mingle with the employees. The Argentines also seem to prefer a strong and charismatic leadership style, and a boss with a strong and colorful personality is usually more highly regarded than a lower-key and more collegial type of leader.

Argentina's time management is also markedly Hispanic. Even by regional standards, they are nocturnal folks. The Argentine workday typically begins and ends later than almost anywhere else on the continent; many executives schedule meetings as late as 8:00 P.M. Nightlife has very late hours as well. Restaurants often don't fill up until midnight, and many nightclubs don't start "rocking" until the wee hours of the morning.

Even more than in other SSSA countries, the correct attire, as mentioned earlier, is important in the Argentine business world, and how one presents oneself plays a large role in how one is perceived. Argentine business fashion tends toward the traditional for both men and women, the understated London style usually being preferred.

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The Argentina that has entered the twenty-first century is very much a nation absorbed in figuring out what went wrong in the twentieth century and what might be done differently in the future, the depth of their current crisis forcing them perhaps more than ever in their history to confront themselves as a people and a nation, without illusions or delusions. Most Argentines today realize all too clearly that they are indeed SSSAs, not Europeans somehow transplanted to an uncivilized and inhospitable continent. Decades of political polarization and upheaval, economic decline, and military defeat emphatically remind them of this reality. Despite all their travails, however, the Argentines continue to number among the most sophisticated and intellectually competent of all the SSSAs, and with concerted collective action they have the potential to create within their borders a society that combines the very best of the New and the Old Worlds, thus achieving, perhaps differently from the future they once imagined, a truly heroic destiny.

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11 In Geert Hofstede's well-known study of IBM business managers in over fifty countries, the Argentines were clearly the most individualistic of the SSSA nationalities.
References and Selected Bibliography


