

THE NATION IN POST-NEOLIBERAL BUENOS AIRES¹

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I. First Draft

Do people really “imagine” or “feel” that they are part of a nation? Do they feel Argentines, Chileans, Spaniards, that is, do they feel, think or imagine that they have something in common with others who belong to the same “nation”? The implications of these questions are not only of philosophical importance. The venerable tribulations associated with the definition, study, and development of *national identity* connects with whether or not people believe that they belong to a *community* called the *nation*. Theories of the nation are associated with theories of the state and problems related to the centralization of authority as well, since often governments have encouraged national sentiment and given definitions of the nation to gain political legitimacy and authority. Indeed, the debate on the *nation* lies at the heart of modern theories of legitimacy, since modernization meant, among other things, that states have the right rule over their own nations and/or nations build up their own states in order to find the best institutional representation for their interests. Studies of the nation ought also to be a part of the definition of the *nation-state* simply because the equation nation-state is not only, as often literature assumes, about the state but also about the nation. Questions about the nation are also a part of the growing literature on identity and especially *national identity*. To study the nation is also to study civil society, especially when civil collective action is related with the right of self-defense, self-determination, and the rejection of what is considered foreigner. Finally, obviously a discussion about the nation connects to more than three centuries of literature on nationalism, patriotism, and the so-called “national sentiment”. This paper, obviously, cannot tackle all these issues. Rather, it focuses on a long overdue matter: whether the nation does exist as a consensual construct in the popular imaginary.

After more than a century of literature that has discussed the nation as a special kind of community that unites members based on something that they think they share with one another (sentiment, love, imagination, ethnicity, religion, culture, institutions, ideology) it is time to ask the common citizen what Ernest Renan in the late nineteenth century famously asked: “What is a nation?”² Surprisingly, scarce –not to say any-- public opinion data has been collected on this topic. Perhaps this is because *the nation* is quite an elusive concept, difficult to pin point through questionnaires suitable for analysis. Or perhaps established literature has rather focused on how the nation has been defined among those at the top. Research is usually driven by the availability of data, and data has been traditionally more obtainable about those who make decisions; the historical record is thicker when one focuses on those who wrote the public record. When it comes to the bulk of the population, however, one finds thinner evidence. In terms of *the nation* we could assume a sort of trickle down effect whereby the ideas of those at the top would filter to those below. Yet this is usually neither an accurate nor a reliable assumption.

¹ This paper is part of a book-length manuscript that compares three Latin American cities: Buenos Aires, Lima, and Montevideo. Survey data for this paper was gathered through opinion polls conducted in the 3 cities during July-December of 2009. The specific data set for Buenos Aires was done on the basis of a sample of 1500 cases. Without the insights and hard work of Raul Aragon and the personnel of the Public Opinion Center of the *Universidad Abierta Interamericana* in Buenos Aires, this paper could not have been written. I am also grateful to the *Secretaría de Investigación y Desarrollo* at the UAI for all their support and enthusiasm. Funding for this fieldwork was possible by a PICTO/UAI grant. Laura Otuno and Ileana Cheszes were part of the research team, and I am more than thankful for their input, help, and hard work. Raul Aragon also collaborated in the formulation of the final argument.

² Renan, Ernest, “What is a Nation?” in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (ed.) *Becoming National*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp 41-55.

Marginalized and discriminated sectors in Latin America and elsewhere, have articulated alternative conceptualizations of the nation and subaltern notions of the nation have been seriously studied.³ Still, we have limited knowledge about what the bulk of the population conceives or imagine the nation to be. In other words, by the first decade of the twentieth first century we do not know enough about how those who are fully integrated into a given political system and institutional framework can perceive, conceptualize, or imagine their nation. To better theorize about the nation state, nationalism, patriotism, and the like, it seems to me that it is crucial to understand what *the nation* means to those who do not actively participate in decision-making or in the writing of national history but who are, so to speak, the bulk of “the nation”. People mobilize in response to nationalist discourse, rally around flag and country, fiercely defend “the nation” and are willing to make sacrifices to defend what seems to be “theirs” as opposed to what seems to be “alien”.⁴ But do the images of the nation that they have in mind coincide with one another in any significant way? Furthermore, do they coincide with what the state and the elites understand by the nation?

In Latin America, urban centers tend to represent the majority of the population of many countries; thus, these cities present ideal situations for opinion polls. In the case of Argentina, Buenos Aires possesses 12.200.000 million inhabitants against 41 million for the whole country. While the results obtained in Buenos Aires cannot be projected to the rest of the territory, it tell us something significant about the nation as a whole. Secondly, highly populated urban centers tend to be more cosmopolitan and diverse than smaller cities, especially if they are in the interior of a given country. Thus, this allows for a better measurement of the impact of variables such as ethnicity, race, and culture. Cities also tend to give us a better idea on the impact of immigration on the popular imaginary. In the case of Buenos Aires, however, as is the case in most Latin American cities, the bulk of immigrants come overwhelmingly from the countryside and other smaller cities rather than from other countries. The impact of recent foreign immigration, although of some import in Buenos Aires (Bolivians, Peruvians, Paraguayans, a few North Americans and Europeans) did not really figure significantly enough in our sample of 1500 cases (only 0.3% of the sample were immigrants from other countries).⁵ Finally, in terms of class divisions and differences in income, Buenos Aires pretty much mirrors the class map of other cities in the Argentine territory, with still a middle/low middle class of about 2 million people and about 6 million inhabitants barely above the poverty line. The rest are below the poverty line and/or live in marginal pockets in the urban environment and shantytowns in the outskirts of the *Capital Federal*. About 250.000 families can be considered high middle class and wealthy.

Our conclusions are somehow startling. In the city of Buenos Aires, the nation, as defined in current literature, does not seem to be installed in the popular imaginary. It appears more a product of scholarly writing, an evocation of politicians’ discourse, or an entity in Constitutions and in the agenda of governments. But when it comes to the imagining or the conceptualizing of its members, the *national community* shows such a degree of fragmentation that one could argue that the nation has no real existence in the minds and hearts of those who, theoretically, constitute the nation.

Finally, this paper intends to overcome a methodological shortcoming that has traditionally beset studies on public opinion: the lack of an appropriate historical and social context that would allow providing background meaning to the results. When devoid of contexts, public opinion can be incomplete and meaningless. Indeed, public opinion reflects transformations that take place elsewhere in the institutional, political, social, cultural, and economic context.

³ Mallon, Florencia E. *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru*. University of California Press, 1995

⁴ See this discussion in Luckacs, John. *Democracy and Populism: Fear and Hatred*. New Heaven, Yale University Press, 2005, pp 33-50

⁵ The survey in the city of Buenos Aires was carried out in August of 2009.

II. Concepts and Confusions: States, Nationalisms and the Nation

For a long time scholars and governments alike thought that the strong patriotism and nationalism that usually went together with controversies about “the nation” and its defense were spurious phenomena, tied only to war, strong leaders, or authoritarian rule. Not that long ago many thought that strong nationalism, for instance, was resiliently associated to authoritarian regimes. Democracies seemed free from the undesired effects of nationalism.⁶ Nationalism had long acquired a bad reputation while the nation, since the fourteenth century, has been seen in a rather ambivalent light, neither cursed nor fully praised. Nationalism, not the nation, was thought to be the problem. By mid nineteenth century it was regarded more as a curse than as a blessing. According to Lord Acton, it was definitely something “to avoid”. By the early twentieth, and in the context of WWI, Albert Einstein thought of it as “an infantile disease, the measles of mankind”. Giving the European wars of the nineteenth and twentieth century this is not surprising. Yet at other historical junctures it was admired as the “utmost sign of modernity and the way to the future.” What we know is that patriotic feelings, nationalism, and the “defense of the nation”, however defined, are not spurious but rather ubiquitous ingredients of social and political systems, and that they do not tend to disappear once the situation that arouses them subsides. This applies to dictatorial regimes and democracies alike. So, where is the nation?

Literature has tended to grant similar connotations to concepts like the nation, nationalism, patriotism, and national sentiment. However, they have different meanings. These definitions connect with others that have been poorly defined as well: “the nation-state”, the “national character” and “national identity”. All these concepts are members of the same family, but they differ conceptually; this is especially true of nationalism and the nation. In general, early literature hinted at the differences between these two but, when it came to definitions, the distinctions were not sharply established. Hans Kohn’s 1939 classic work is a case in point. He very much anticipated Benedict Anderson’s popular conceptualization of the nation as a community where members do not, in reality, get to know one another face to face. He defined nationalism as a “sentiment”, specifically as a special kind of love of a “larger unknown community” (the nation). Only in theory --and using our imagination-- we could, in fact, become familiar and attached to a national community. In Kohn’s definitions, however, nationalism and the nation remained quite close: “Nationalism...is a highly complex and originally abstract feeling which gains the emotional warmth of concreteness only through the effects of an historical development which by education, economic interdependence, and corresponding political and social institutions, brings about the integration of the masses and their identification with a body far too great for any concrete experience. Nationalism --our identification with the lives and aspirations of uncounted millions, whom we shall never know, within a territory which we shall never visit in its entirety, is qualitatively different from the love of family or of home surroundings. It is qualitatively akin to love of humanity or of the whole earth.”⁷

Most literature today agrees that nationalism is the defense of the nation and thus different from *the nation*, however defined. That is, nationalism is the “*love of the nation*” and, as such, stands separate from the entity -- “the nation”-- which is the object of its love. Nationalism has been defined as an “ideology” (Antony Smith), while the nation has traditionally been understood as a *community*. One can reach the semi-paradoxical conclusion that strong national sentiment and the strong collective action that it generates does not need to correlate with a consensus of what the nation really means in the collective imaginary. While the inhabitants of Buenos Aires are highly nationalistic, the data below shows that they cannot agree as to what the nation is or means to them. The purpose of nationalism would be to defend what is “ours” against what is viewed as “foreigner”. Yet this does not unavoidably mean that the bulk of the population need to necessarily coincide on the definition and imagining of what they defend, *the nation*, or that the nation needs to actually exist as “a community” for nationalism to thrive. Apparently

⁶ See, for instance, Lewis Siegel Baum and Andrei Sokolov, *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents* (Yale University Press, 2001); Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), makes a similar argument.

⁷ Kohn, Hans, “The Nature of Nationalism”, *The American Political Science Review*, V. 33, no. 6, 1939, pp 1001-1021, p. 1006.

given the data gathered in these opinion polls, nationalism can develop, succeed, and function independently from whether or not a consensual image of the nation actually exists in the popular imaginary.

Nationalism, therefore, may defend a nation that does not possess actuality in the collective imaginary. It appears to stand to reason that the way members of a given national community conceptualize the nation would have an impact upon the foundation of nationalism. This, however, is only true when we talk about structuring nationalist discourse, when politicians woo for nationalist values, and when intellectuals write nationalist ideology. But it seems not to be true that the actual national community needs to exist as a consensual construct in the minds of people for nationalism to grow and develop. In other words, nationalism can generate national sentiment and collective action regardless of how well defined the nation may be in the minds of its members. Historical evidence has shown that people can defend their nation even if they do not necessarily agree as to what the nation means. If the nation emerges as a fractured notion in the collective imaginary, and members of that community do not really agree as to the defining characteristics of their nation, what kind of nation does nationalism defend? Historically, nationalism may have defended nations that possessed no real roots in the collective imaginary. A few words more about the definition of *the nation* are needed before we pass to the next section.

From Renan's lectures in the late nineteenth century and Weber writings in the 1920s, to Greenfeld, Anderson, and beyond, literature has concurred that *a community* (the national community) exists either in real historical terms or in the minds and hearts of the people who are its members. Not surprisingly, these notions have been and are opened to serious questioning. Yet literature has concurred on one point: that the nation can be defined as a community and that it constructs a linkage of solidarity among members. Thus, the "national community" would both unite members and offer a center of gravity from which to define their "national identity". Max Weber defined the nation as a "community of sentiment". While the word "sentiment" –as coined by Weber when defining the national community—it has also been used in definitions of nationalism, national identity, and patriotism—is an important clue, the word "community", in Weber, is more important than the word "sentiment". He uses it extensively, for instance, to explain the case of Germany.

Benedict Anderson has gone the furthest in terms of defining the nation as a community that exists just in the imagining of its members, rather than in real terms. In his captivating argument, he stressed that the nation is an "imagined community" of solidarity that unites its members in a similar "imagining".⁸ So, for Anderson, the key for the existence of such community is that members imagine it in a similar way –as exemplified by his mentioning of the written press and the use of the vernacular in imagining the nation.⁹ In the city of Buenos Aires, at least, this similar imagining is rather absent. The fragmentation of this imagining means that 40% do not know what the nation is and that in the 49% who say that they do the nation is defined in a very fragmented way using very different categories including culture, home, territory, and people (see Figure 1 below, "In your own words define the nation").

For Ernest Renan the nation was a community defined by love. The "love of the nation" was "spontaneous" and "voluntary" and emerged "naturally among the members of a given community".¹⁰ We can also talk about love of country, love of the motherland, territory, etc., in similar terms. It is important to note that Renan came to this conclusion by discarding a number of factors –common language, religion, ethnicity, and culture—that were, in his time, believed to provide the ingredients that glued nations as a whole. Since he found too many exceptions he concluded that these variables were "insufficient" as

⁸ Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983. See as well his 2005, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and Anti-Colonial Imagination*. London: Verso.

⁹ Anderson, op. cit. 1983, pp 24-33.

¹⁰ Renan, Ernest, "What is a Nation?" in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (ed.) *Becoming National*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp 41-55.

binding factors that could explain the nation and its communal character.¹¹

In the case of the city of Buenos Aires, Renan seems to have been right. The overwhelming majority of its inhabitants share the same language, cultural values, and religion --there are some ethnic differences but, overall, these are also minimal. And yet we found a high degree of fragmentation in our sample. So, despite a considerable degree of homogeneity in the population of Buenos Aires, their responses were highly fragmented and diverse. The love of the nation, however, found a place in Figure 2. A number of people spoke of loving being Argentinean, loving the nation, etc. They represented a sector into the 42.5 who said that being Argentinean was “feeling the homeland.” Yet they were hardly an enough number to express a dominant consensus about the nation. If in mid nineteenth century Renan was puzzled by how the national communities he knew held together and how the nation could be defined, the data below keeps his questions quite current.

As I have argued elsewhere, just “to imagine” the national community seems insufficient as a mechanism of solidarity making and community creating.¹² Most definitions assume the existence of a shared perceived or imagined emotional attachment that unites members with their “nation” and, thus, with each other. For that attachment to become a real binding force members need not only to imagine but also to *conceptualize* their nation in some consensual way. If this conceptualization does not take place, the “imagining” of a nation to which all members belong cannot materialize. People need not only to “imagine”, as Anderson has argued, but also *to know* that they share something that unites them as a nation.¹³ If what they may have in common is not clear to them, or they cannot conceptualize it, or they do not know what that really is, can we still speak of the nation as a *community* that unites them in a familiar imagining or sentiment? Maybe we have to go back to Renan and say that since we are not sure as to what factors make this possible, we assume that a special kind of “love” should bind the nation together. But this is not really satisfying. Maybe we should abandon the notion that a national *community* (imagined, loved, conceptualized, or real) actually exists as a consensual imagining or thinking in the minds and hearts of its members.

We could speak of nations as artificial creations that governments construct in order to gain legitimacy and unite populations under the same symbolisms and foundational myths. This is a key part of state building as well. This makes sense, especially in Latin America, where the state has been the major crafter of the nation. Historical myths, symbols, and liturgy became part of the definition of the nation, and provide inspiration for collective action, giving content to nationalism. Sheldon Wolin tells us: “collectivities take shape historically, that is, as a matter of fact; but they come into being mythically....Their main purpose is to fix certain meanings about matters that are alleged to be fundamental because they pertain to the identity and flourishing of the whole society.”¹⁴ A nagging question remains, however, unresolved: we do not always know how successful governments are at “fixing” those meanings. We just have some indicators: the agendas of educational reformers that hammer down given ideas of the nation and encouraged nationalism and patriotism; textbooks that “invent tradition” and socialize children in schools into the “national culture”; conscription and the military, which have been used as mechanisms of identity creation for the rural poor, immigrants, and some members of the middle and upper classes; urban policies aimed at rescuing the national patrimony and exult tradition, heroes, territories, and selected pieces of real state as symbols of the nation; the writing of national history; the use of symbols (flags, shields, etc.) as emblems of the nation, not to mention museums and monuments, memorials, etc. The enormous efforts of the political elite and the state to rescue, change, and consolidate a given set of definitions of the nation are apparent. Hence the nation may still exist, but just as a byproduct of

¹¹ Renan, Ernest, “What is a Nation?” See the famous lecture by Renan in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (ed.) *Becoming National*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp 41-55.

¹² Lopez-Alves, Fernando, The Novelty of Latin America: Globalizations, Futures, and National Identity” 2009 *Research Paper Series* no 648, University of CEMA

¹³ See Lopez-Alves, Fernando, “The Novelty of Latin America....”, 2009, Pp 4-8:

¹⁴ Wolin, Sheldon, *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution*. Baltimore, the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 1 and 2.

governmental policies rather than as a community living in the hearts and minds of the people. Again, if historically in Latin America the major crafter of the nation has been the state, we can ask: Has the state succeeded at imposing imaginings or conceptualizations of the nation on the public imaginary? The results of these opinion polls raise serious doubts that this has been the case.

The 5 questions used in these polls gave interviewees the chance to express, in their own words, what they thought the nation meant over a questionnaire that included a total of 8. The aim was to capture in which particular ways and within what kind of conceptual framework the common citizen imagines, conceptualizes, or “feels” her/his nation.

III. Buenos Aires and the Argentine nation

My argument is that globalization and especially the pace and depth of neo-liberal reforms have impacted the way the citizens of Buenos Aires conceive and think of their nation. While there are no previous opinion polls on this subject to which we can compare the data below, there is other connected evidence that allow us to guess that, prior to the adoption of neo-liberalism, a more consensual image of the nation did exist. Since the early 1990s to 2005 and beyond, the cutting down of social services, the adjustment of public institutions to free market policies, political instability, the low credibility of politicians, and the widespread consensus that the government (city and federal) was held hostage by private and foreign interests, created a situation of disbelief and pessimism.¹⁵ Pessimism, as a matter of fact, is something that has usually characterized societies going through economic downturns and growing mistrust in government.¹⁶ Argentina fits into this description, and certainly the decade of the 1990s was a decade of growing pessimism. Citizens refused to pay taxes and to fulfill basic civic duties.¹⁷ In this period Argentina, and particularly the city of Buenos Aires, became one of the most highly mobilized societies in the world. Unemployment rose and local industries virtually vanished. Foreign direct investment rose but quickly declined before the middle of the decade, dashing the hopes that a sustainable economy could emerge after the radical privatization of public institutions and services.

Figure 1 on unemployment about here¹⁸

The growing feeling that no plan for the future existed and that the political leadership could not provide needed guidance undermined the existing sense of community and lead to unusual levels of discontent, especially in the city of Buenos Aires. By 2002, citizens’ disconnect with the performance of government –and also the national state-- increased, leading to a situation similar to a “divorce” between civil society and government.¹⁹ While, as indicated, we do not have prior surveys explicitly focusing on the meaning of “the nation”, prior survey data on other related issues indicate that during the 1990s and early 2000s, especially in the city of Buenos Aires, the disrepute of public institutions and the government

¹⁵ For a full discussion on all these aspects of neo-liberal reform in Argentina, see Fernando Lopez-Alves and Diane Johnson (ed.) *Globalization and Uncertainty y Latin America*, Palgrave 2007, especially F Lopez-Alves “Uncertainty, the Construction of the Future, and the Divorce Between Citizens and the State in Latin America”, chapter 1. See also Michael Mussa, *Argentina y el FMI: Del triunfo a la tragedia* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2002); Raul Aragon, “La Opinion Publica y el Estado en la Argentina neo-Liberal” *Foro Abierto*, 2006, no. 2, pp12-19.

¹⁶ For a very interesting discussion on the concept of “pessimism” and its history in European philosophical thought, see Joshua Foa Dienstag, “Nietzsche’s Dionysian Pessimism,” *American Political Science Review*, 2001, 95 December, pp 923-937. For a specific discussion on pessimism in Argentina and Uruguay during the 1990s and its political consequences, see Fernando Lopez-Alves, “Neo-Liberal Pessimism in Argentina: 1990-2002,” paper presented at the Center of International Studies, Princeton University, May 2002. See also the same paper in its Spanish version in *Foro Abierto*, Buenos Aires, UAI, December 2006, vo. 1, no 3.

¹⁷ Regarding tax evasion and other negative consequences of the application of neo-liberal reform in Argentina in relation to globalization during the 1990s, see James E. Mahon, Jr., and Javier Corrales, “Pegged for Failure?: Argentina’s Crisis,” *Current History* February 2004.

¹⁸ By 2002 50% of the middle class, most of it resident of Buenos Aires, went under the poverty level

¹⁹ Lopez-Alves, Fernando, and Raul Aragon, “Futures, Uncertainty and Neo-Liberal Pessimism in Argentina” paper presented at the conference “Nation, State and Society in the Southern Cone” Universidad Catolica del Uruguay, Montevideo, August 2009.

reached unprecedented low figures. Since the mid 1980s, but specially starting in the 1990s, other surveys also revealed the high degree of discontent and disconnect that citizens, especially in the city of Buenos Aires, felt regarding the performance of the political class, growing corruption, insecurity, and the role of institutions in general.²⁰ The disrepute of the political class was staggering and still, in a sense, is. One can argue that during the last half of the 1990s and 2003 the already damaged reputation of the political elite dwindled to unprecedented levels. Politicians were in fact taken the lion's share of an economy in disarray where day after day new families found themselves dragged down below the established threshold of the "poverty line".²¹ As for a sense of community and national solidarity, the scarce available data we possess shows that during the 1990s and up until 2008 it dwindled among Argentines, and, especially, in the city of Buenos Aires.²²

I see a connection between all these changes and the 2009 data on national identity and the nation presented below. At the same time, a deeper historical study may reveal different factors that can account for this fragmentation. In fact, it may very well be that the fragmentation I found in the surveys reflects a deep-seated feature of the Argentine nation state. We can speculate that maybe in the City of Buenos Aires the conceptualization of the nation in the imaginary was never consensual or never installed. It is telling that from a data base that also includes the same survey in the cities of Montevideo and Lima, Buenos Aires stands out as the most fragmented sample. We found such strong variations in the public imaginary of the nation that one can suggest that this urban population is not, in fact, a "community of nationals" in the way that literature has defined such community. It is telling that this survey was conducted at the heels of an already two-year-old initiative of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires aimed at the historical revalorization of the city, the restoration of patrimonial sites, and a media campaign to restore a sense of national pride –not to mention attracting tourism. Apparently, these policies seemed to have had little effect on the creation of a consensus regarding the meaning and definition of the national community.

Here are pie charts of the 5 main questions posed to our interviewees.

²⁰ World Values Survey-TNS Gallup Argentina, 1984-2002. See as well the well-researched book by Marita Carballo, which shows how Argentines and especially citizens of Buenos Aires responded to a number of political, social, leadership, and identity issues. See also Carlos Vilas, "Pobreza, Desigualdad y Susentabilidad Democrática: El Ciclo Corto de la Crisis Argentina," unpublished manuscript, Secretaría de Seguridad y Acción Social, July 2003.

²¹ The House of Deputies, for instance, absorbed \$195 million of the special budget destined to recover from the economic crisis, and the rest went to the Senate and the Executive. None of these institutions accounted for its allocation. See *La Nación*, February 26, 2002 12-13. See also Guillermo Lanfranconi, *Yo Pago, Tu Pagas, Ellos Gastan*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta, 2001.

²² Raul Aragon "La Comunidad Nacional y La Nación", paper presented at the conference "Globalization y America Latina en el Siglo 21", Universidad Abierta and

Figure 1:

En dos o tres palabras, díganos que quiere decir para Ud. la palabra Nación.



Figure 2:

¿Qué es para Ud. ser Argentino?

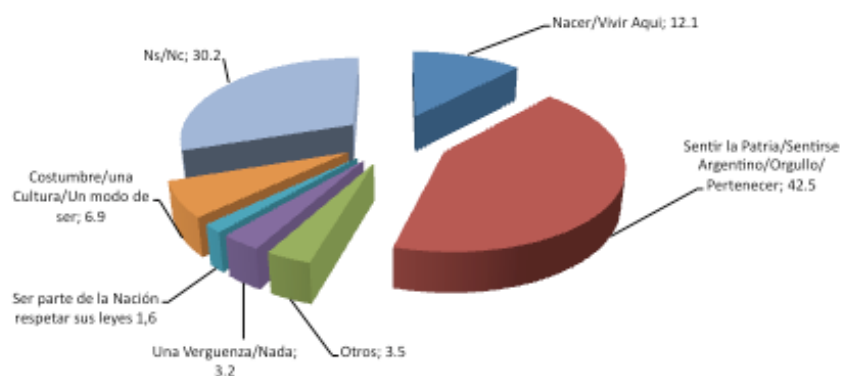


Figure 3:

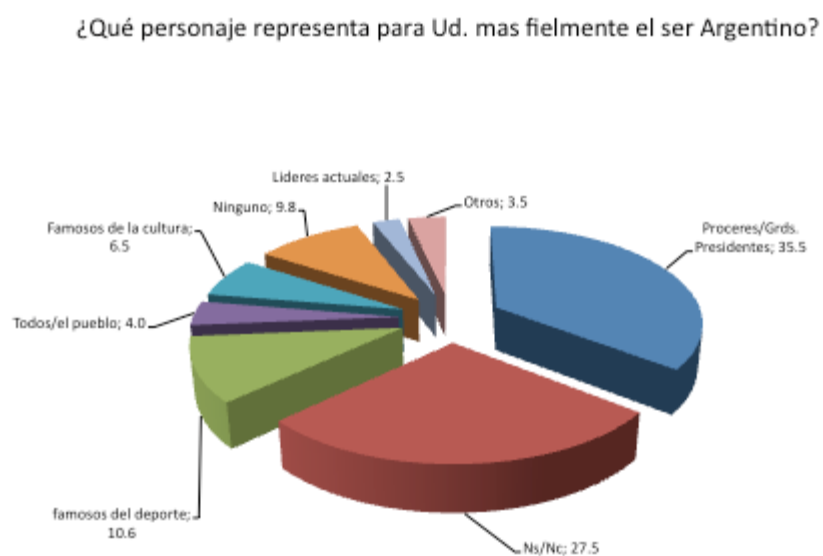


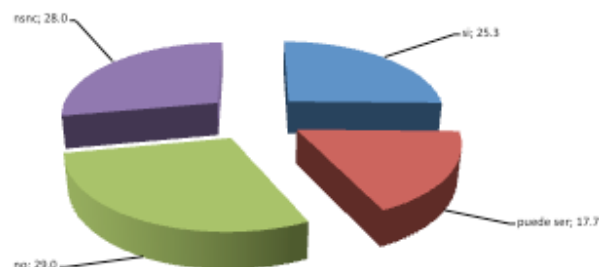
Figure 4:

¿Si todos los habitantes de Argentina se dispersaran por el mundo y se fuera a vivir a otros lugares, la Argentina seguiría existiendo?



Figure 5:

¿Si todos los habitantes de Argentina se mudaran todos juntos a otra tierra, ese nuevo lugar sería Argentina?



In our first question (Figure 1) respondents were asked to express in their own words, what the concept “nation” meant to them. Figure 1 strikingly shows a significant lack of consensus as to what the nation may mean for its urban members. But more than anything else, it shows that almost half of the sample did not know what it meant. More than 40% of respondents admitted that they could not come up with a definite meaning for the word “nation”. This finding alone could justify the claim that “the nation” seems to be an elusive concept and that it does not exist as a shared collective. Second, observe that “people”, a category that should be crucial if we are to define the nation as a community, occupies only a 5.8 of the sample. Other notions not associated in the literature with the nation, such as geography and territory figured importantly in the answers given (24.2).

Could the question: “what does the word nation mean to you?” be a tricky question? In some ways, it could. The question pressed interviewees to define something that they usually do not talk about or are not accustomed to characterize as part of their common everyday vocabulary. This difficulty was partially corrected by asking what did it mean to be “Argentinean” (Figure 2). This, unlike Nation, this is a very commonly used concept. It is a notion closely connected to national identity and “the nation” but that the common citizen often uses in everyday parlance. The usage of terms is obviously important to create consciousness. Echoing others who have studied the forging of the Mexican nation Timothy Anna has argued that when at some point in the history of Mexico people started to refer to themselves as “Mexicans” that marked the beginning of Mexican national identity.²³ Therefore, the use of terms like Mexican, Argentinean, Peruvian, etc. can be taken to mean an expression of identity.

As can be seen in Figure 2, however, more than 30.2 % of the Buenos Aires sample still responded that they did not know what to be Argentinean meant. As in Figure 1, we found a rich variety of responses regarding this question. A second observation is that tradition and culture as a definition of being Argentinean was the preference of only a 6.9% of the respondents. This questions much literature that has assumed that culture is the most powerful binding force of identity. The striking majority in Figure 2

²³ Anna, Timothy, *Forging Mexico*, University of Nebraska Press, 1998, pp 14-16.

(42.5%) offered a mosaic of responses that I grouped into a category labeled “feeling the homeland”.

Chart 2b represents the fragmentation among those 42.5 respondents who, in Figure 2 responded that to be Argentinean was as “a sentiment”. As we can see, this 42.5 % is highly fragmented as to what feeling Argentinean meant. Territory, people, institutions are all part of the representation of “feeling the homeland” or “loving Argentina”.

Chart 2 B. Feeling the Homeland

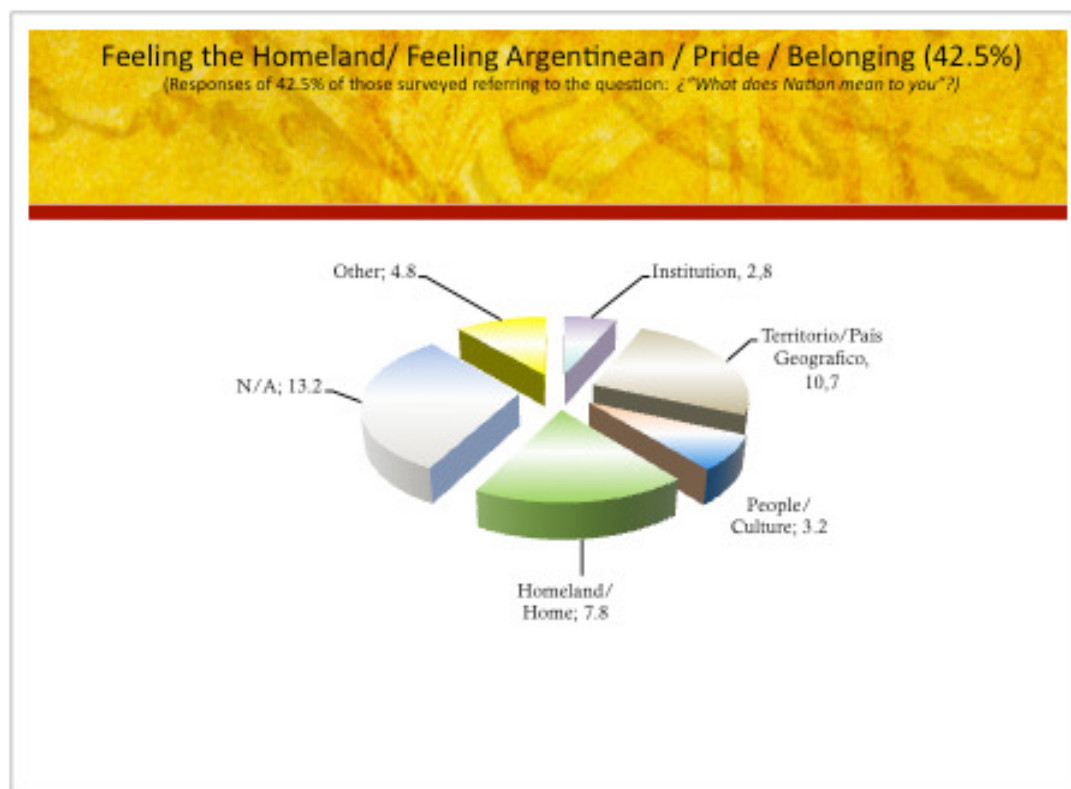


Figure 3 attempted to create an opportunity to imagine and conceptualize identity (being Argentinean) in reference to well known personages and popular icons. We hoped to find some definite preference that could hint at a consensual notion of what to be Argentinean meant. The fragmentation however persisted. 35.5% of the sample felt that some founding father or famous president represented best what it meant to be Argentinean. Given that these usually are the favorite figures and symbols used by states in creating identity, this percentage was not very significant. Current leaders obtained only a shabby 2.5%; culture and sport icons obtained low percentages as well. A large number, 27.5 % of the sample, did not feel comfortable associating being Argentinean with any particular “famous” person. The degree of fragmentation here is a bit less than in the other questions, but not high enough to provide the basis for a shared imagining of national identity.

Figures 4 and 5 tease out the importance of territory as a dimension associated with the nation. As indicated, scholarly literature does not relate the nation with territory or geographical location. Rather, “country” and “patria”, rather than “nation”, have been argued to possess a geographical reference.²⁴

²⁴ See definitions and discussion on current literature in Luckacs, John. *Democracy and Populism: Fear and Hatred*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005, pp 33-45

The high fragmentation found within this group, however, does not authorize to formulate a clear definition of the nation including the dimension of territoriality either.

Figure 4 asks whether if all inhabitants were to abandon Argentina and were to live in other places, would still that territory left behind be Argentina? 27.9% of respondents answered in the affirmative; so that territory was very important to them. 27.5%, however, did not know, that is, roughly a quarter of our sample. Another 26.9% considered that if that were the case Argentina would not exist, assigning therefore importance to people over territory. Another 17.6% argued that if this would happen the nation only would exist “relatively”. Looking at these results, one can conclude that the nation as a human community constitutes a point of reference only for one quarter of our sample. Looking at the chart as a whole, it is clear is that for the majority the nation is not defined as a community of humans. Can we still speak about a human community that would live in the minds and hearts of people independently of location and territory? It seems that we cannot. Can we speak of the nation as associated with territoriality? Given the fragmentation of the sample, it seems that we cannot either. Renan had already sensed, correctly, that territory was not a defining variable of the nation. His argument was based on the fact that many nations existed outside a given territory. Language and religion seemed to keep the nation alive even if members did not reside together in a particular country ruled by a particular state. Hungarians, Jews, Germans, etc., are good examples.²⁵ Are members of Diasporas still considered part of the nation? In Figure 4, the people of Buenos Aires were rather divided over this question.

In Figure 5 we double check on the importance of territory by asking what I called an “exodus” question. If all the inhabitants, in mass, were to live somewhere else, would that new land be Argentina? Again, a quarter of the sample 25.3% responded in the affirmative. A 29.0% claimed the opposite. 17.7% said that in that case Argentina would only exist “relatively” and a large 28.0 % confessed that they did not know. Therefore, we can call question no. 4 a “Diaspora question”, and question no. 5 an “Exodus question”.

IV. Conclusions

- 1) *The nation*, as a concept and an imagined community is not installed in the collective imaginary of the city of Buenos Aires. I suspect that one can find a similar situation in other Latin American cities as well.
- 2) The neoliberal policies of the 1990s had a dissociating effect on the collective representation of the nation.
- 3) Historically the state may have been ineffective at imposing consensus over the definition, imagining, and construction of the nation. Therefore, the fragmentation of national identity that we observe has not exclusively resulted from the 1990s and neoliberalism. There are important historical roots that need to be explored.
- 4) Scholarly literature on the nation needs revisiting; in other words, to think the nation as a “community” may not be accurate.
- 5) Nationalism can be strong, even if the nation is not installed in the popular imaginary.
- 6) The fragmentation obtained in the whole sample can be seen in figure 6:

²⁵ On Germany, see the work of Mosse, George, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*. New York, Howard Fertig, 1975.

