

A once promising and prosperous nation searches for a precedent that can turn it away from its rapid degeneration into underdevelopment

# The Sad Case of Argentina

Richard O'Mara

She's an airline hostess, with the conventional beauty of the type. Above an open and smiling face the copy reads: "Lindsay MacGowan's grandfather came from Glasgow. Her grandmother came from Dublin. She wants to fly you home with her to Argentina."

Lindsay and two of her compatriots were featured in an advertising campaign for Aerolineas Argentinas late last year. Their purpose was to persuade American readers of *Business Week* that Argentina and its national airline are European, which presumably suggests efficiency and, as the ad puts it, customer treatment that is "Stylish and rather grand," not South American, which suggests the opposite.

For those familiar with Argentina (or the airline) that characterization is, to say the kindest thing, inexact. By any objective measurement Argentina's condition is not good. Its economy is weak, its political life a shambles, and hopes for improvement in both areas are not bright.

Consider the economy: As of September of last year the inflation rate in Argentina had already reached 180 per cent, possibly the highest in the world. It was 176 per cent for 1977, down from 444 per cent in 1976. National production is less than vigorous: The gross domestic product actually declined in 1975 and 1976 over the previous years. It recovered somewhat in 1977, but still remains below the level of 1970. Buenos Aires today is one of the most expensive cities in the world. Yet the real wages of Argentina's army of industrial workers, once the best paid in Latin America (20 per cent of the country's work force is in manufacturing), are shrinking. Rents are astronomical; clothing is expensive and of poor quality. About the only bargains are public transportation, wine, and beef.

The political picture is even more cloudy. Argentina's military government seized power in March, 1976, deposing from the presidency the wife of the late Juan Domingo Perón, María Estela (Isabelita) de Perón, who

as vice president had succeeded her husband after his death in July, 1974. Since this latest coup, over 15,000 people have disappeared. Many more have fled the country in fear of their lives. Scores of journalists have been imprisoned and murdered. According to Amnesty International, about 4,000 political prisoners languish in Argentine jails. In response to a left-wing guerrilla campaign that reached the height of its fury in 1974 and 1975, the military instituted a reign of counterterror that has touched most Argentines at least indirectly. It has abated somewhat in the last two years only because most of the guerrillas, their sympathizers, and suspected sympathizers have been destroyed, imprisoned, or exiled.

Argentina has a labor movement that, when not totally restrained by military violence, makes Britain's look reasonable by comparison. Nowhere in the world is the mystique of the general strike so compelling as in Argentina; not even in France has the ideology of syndicalism so many adherents. In the late 1960's, after an especially severe rash of strikes, Landru, Argentina's mordant cartoonist, captured the essence of his country's predicament in a single drawing. It was a simple map of Argentina with a sign stuck in the middle: "NO FUNCIONA" (Out of Order).

How South American can you get? And it should be added that all this does not describe a recently arrived at situation, an anomaly. In 1957, Héctor A. Murena, the Argentine novelist, wrote: "Argentina often hits the front page of foreign newspapers. Thanks to our military coups d'état...we have revealed ourselves to be just what we used to boast that we were not: South Americans. Since 1930 military coups—triumphant, defeated, or abortive—exceed three dozen in number...." The subsequent two decades have produced so many more coups—"triumphant, defeated, or abortive"—that the young man's chagrin most surely has soured into the older man's despair. Since 1955 there have been twelve presidents; not one of them has finished his term of office. Since 1930 there have been twenty-one presidents and well over fifty economy ministers. Most Argentine presidents in the last fifty years have been unelected generals.

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Despite all this, Argentina can indeed tout its Europeanness, even if the well-ordered state to which that adjective alludes does not exist here. It ought to; all the ingredients for it are there. Argentina is not essentially a South American country, but a European country set in South America that has gone haywire. Unlike many other Latin American countries, Argentina's population is thoroughly white and European. Though an Indian influence is evident in the interior, the Spanish and Italian strains so dominate as to make any non-Western elements (Indian or African) negligible.

It is one of the most universally educated of countries. There are twenty-five million Argentines; a full quarter, six to seven million of them, are in school. The national literacy rate is 93 per cent. Argentina sparked the first and most extensive university reform, which led to the concept of university autonomy throughout Latin America. The country's intellectuals, writers, scientists, and artists enjoy worldwide renown. If there is a criticism to be leveled it is that Argentine intellectual life is too imitative of Europe's. Buenos Aires looks somewhat like Paris (the city was laid out according to the designs of Baron Georges Haussmann, Napoleon III's urban designer); Argentina's urban culture has a French tone.

Physically, Argentina is among the blessed countries of the earth. The *pampa humeda* that rolls through its broad center is spectacularly fertile. Argentine beef and grains have fed Argentines and Europeans for generations. Beef remains the staple in the diet, unlike Brazil, which has one of the largest herds in the world but is a meat exporter whose people rarely eat meat. The beef accounts for the Argentine's high per capita protein intake—102 grams per day as compared to 105 in the U.S.

Beef and grain powered Argentina's rapid development in the early part of the twentieth century, making the country the tenth richest in the world by 1920. The booming markets for these products during the two world wars also permitted Argentina's manufacturing sector to develop. Its merchants thrived to the point that even in the early 1960's, when the atrophy was far advanced, Argentina was still the leading country in Latin America and was expected eventually to play a major role on the world stage.

Today Mexico, Venezuela, and especially Brazil are thrusting forward while Argentina stagnates. A then-and-now comparison gives perspective: From 1874 to 1912 crop acreage in Argentina increased fifty-seven times. Yet in 1963 there was actually less land growing wheat than in 1912. In 1962 fewer cattle grazed on the pampa than in 1922. Jean François Revel, the French intellectual, wrote recently that Argentina actually changed from a developed country into an underdeveloped one. Underdeveloped, that is, when compared to the United States or Western Europe; within the context of the Third World, Argentina remains developed.

What interrupted Argentina's drive forward, and can it be resumed? How can this people, so materially and culturally endowed, be so inept politically and economically? The country stands as a magnificent dilemma, for

it proves by its tortured existence that there are no assured formulas for national success, that we are all susceptible to uncontrolled political disintegration.

Héctor Murena's lament, quoted above, was written two years after the overthrow of Juan Domingo Perón. It was a time of disorientation in Argentina, a period of withering sobriety after nine years of heady balcony politics. It is common among Argentines to blame their country's predicament on Juan Perón and the movement that perpetuates his name. It is easy to do, for the phenomenon of Peronism looms so large in any idea of the country that virtually everything that has occurred in recent years can be interpreted as an assertion of, or reception to, Peronism. But for Argentines to blame Perón for all their problems is an attempt to escape responsibility. The country was politically confused for fifteen years before Perón's first ascent to power. The confusion continued long after his departure. It continues today, five years after Perón's death. If anything, Perón, starting with his first presidency in 1946, imposed something resembling a national mission upon the country.

Peronism was the third sea change in Argentine political history. From its independence in 1816, Argentina was run by and in the interests of the large landholders, the beef barons, the builders of the great export houses who operated in alliance with foreign (mostly British) interests. In 1916 the oligarchs were shoved aside by an emergent middle class under the leadership of the austere, brilliant, and eccentric Hipólito Irigoyen, chief of the Radical party. (Some recall that election, and Irigoyen's second election in 1928, as the only two untainted presidential elections in Argentina's history.)

Irigoyen ruled in the interest of this class and paternally for the unorganized poor. He was overthrown in 1930 by the military, and for thirteen years the oligarchy was returned to power. Then came the revolution of 1943, and three years later Perón, who gave wide currency to the idea that the political economy of the country was to serve the masses, not the wealthy minority or the middle class. This idea had some salutary effects on Argentina: It persuaded millions of Argentines that they had an interest in their country, that their voices could help direct the nation's course. Its big drawback—the drawback of most populist and egalitarian movements—was that it emphasized distribution of the national product at the expense of capital formation and encouraged hostility to capital investment, especially foreign. Thus, the history of Argentina can be seen as a history of class conflict, more sharply defined perhaps than that of any country in the West.

(Perón during his lifetime was often charged with hypocrisy and cynicism, and it was asserted that he never really believed in the proletarian myth he propagated. Maybe he didn't, but he convinced a lot of people of it. He cemented a vast constituency, imbued its members with an irreducible loyalty that was to last his lifetime, and which was frequently spectacular in its expression. During 1973 and 1974, the years of Perón's second residence in Argentina, observers were struck by the great numbers of youths who professed allegiance to Perón. With the zeal of Red Guards they marched in the streets

of Buenos Aires, Rosario, Córdoba, singing the Peronist anthems, pounding on huge drums, their shadows thrusting against the yellow light of torches. It was all the more remarkable because these youths had never had any direct experience of life under Perón.)

**A**lejandro E. Bunge, the Argentine economist, once described his countrymen as "arrogant, sad and lazy." It is a cruel definition and does not encompass the totality of the national character, leaving out the more salient positive qualities, such as generosity, sensitivity, and loyalty (personal loyalty, that is, not political). They are arrogant, that is true. But it is an arrogance instilled during the years of their preeminence. As with an old actor accustomed to star billing who has hit the skids, it is easier to adjust to the material aspects of his comedown than to accept the loss of self-esteem.

That Argentines are sad is evident from their music,

the piquant tango and folk songs, their literature (the dark visions of Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar), their art in general. Argentines are sad in the way many Latin peoples are sad, burdened as they are with a tragic sense of life, caught in the paralyzing embrace of determinism.

Are they lazy? That is too subjective a condition to comment on. But they are cynical, impatient, and show little regard for laws they themselves have written. They are cynical because they have no faith in the institutions they pretend to profess, most notably the institution of democracy, nor do they believe in the long-range benefits of self-government. Year after year Argentines have demonstrated a maddening impatience with the political process and little willingness to muddle through bad times. When things get difficult, they are always ready to cut short their government's mandate and start over with a new regime. The new government invariably fails to satisfy the unrealistic expectations generated around

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*President and Vice-President Perón on inauguration day, October, 1973:  
"Perhaps this time he could put the brass permanently in its place."*



it. It is a vicious circle that discourages the development of civilian political leadership, produces corruption at all levels of government, and thus stimulates the disenchantment that leads to new turnovers.

There is a grievous lack of leadership. Ricardo Balbin remains chief of the Radical party, the second largest after the Peronist movement. He was active in the party in the 1920's. When Perón returned in 1973 and assumed power, he began placing men his own age or older in positions of power. There was simply nobody else. During his years of exile Perón always discouraged—sometimes with violence—any potential successors.

There have been more than a few explanations offered in the past for these flaws. One is that Argentines cannot work together because they are a nation of individuals instead of a community. Murena believed this, and he is supported by many intellectuals. Others claim that Argentina, owing to its heavy Mediterranean immigration, has absorbed too many absolutist ideologies, everything from Italian fascism to Spanish anarchism, to anarcho-syndicalism, and that these have badly splintered the Argentine political mentality. Some of the more ridiculous explanations for the situation gain credence. I arrived in Buenos Aires one evening from Chile in 1975 and was heading for my hotel in a taxi when I fell into a conversation with the driver on the political situation. Unlike the United States, nearly everyone in Argentina is political and can be expected to have an informed opinion. Wrong, maybe, but informed. "The trouble with Argentina," he said, "is there are too many ideas here." A few like the Toynbean challenge-and-response interpretation. According to this, Argentina—a vast and rich land with a temperate climate—is inhabited by relatively few people (twenty-five million) who have had things easy for virtually their entire national existence and they have grown soft of spirit because of it.

Whatever is at the root of the problem, there is no doubt that Argentines are Argentina's worst enemies. The country's growth and development have been retarded by the political chaos that has become so institutionalized over the years. This chaos is expressed most explicitly through militarism. Throughout Argentina's modern history the military has stood at the center of its political life. It is the persistent interferer, the author of unscheduled change, the weapon wielded by one class against the other. Earlier (before 1916) it served as executor of the assumed rights of the oligarchy, later as the deposer of the middle class led by Irigoyen and the Radicals (1930). More recently, it was the deposer of the first Peronist government (1955), restorer of the second Peronist government (1973), and then its deposer again (1976). The military government that runs Argentina today, headed nominally by General Jorge Videla of the Army, is indistinguishable from so many other governments of the past. Its future is not promising.

It is obvious that Argentines are susceptible to militarism. That is, if one could metaphorize militarism as an illness, then Argentina's got it, has had it for a long time,

and can't seem to shake it. But the metaphor will not hold if it is being used—as Peronism always is—as the single cause of Argentina's problems. Disease attacks the body from the outside. Argentina's generals do not come from any country but Argentina. They are activated by ideals and purposes that are inherently Argentine. Like military people in most countries, those in Argentina tend to be nationalistic at their best, xenophobic at their worst, the result possibly of the country's remoteness from the intellectual currents of the world.

Yet, if militarism is not the basic flaw of the Argentines, it is the dominant symptom and deserves special treatment. Until the military power in Argentina can be bridled permanently, little progress will be made in bringing order to the country politically or economically. The military institution in Argentina is fragmented, heavily politicized, and not a little corrupt. The corruption manifests itself in many small ways. In 1976 a friend was living in a Buenos Aires apartment near the famous necropolis at Recoleta and was required to pay her rent in dollars. Dealing in foreign currency when heroic sacrifices were being demanded of workers and merchants alike might not have been illegal, but it was hardly the action of one who puts the nation's interests above his own. The apartment was owned by Admiral Emilio Massera, the most vociferously nationalistic of the three-member junta running the country.

It is possible that in recent years a large number of Argentines have come to recognize the debilitating effect militarism has had on their national life. In this light one can interpret the unexpected loyalty so many young people demonstrated for Perón upon his return six years ago. Perón was brought back in 1973 by the general then ruling Argentina, Alejandro Lanusse, the third in a line since the 1966 coup d'état against the civilian president Arturo Illia. Lanusse, unnerved by the growing antimilitary sentiment in Argentina (manifesting itself by violent strikes, student demonstrations, and a guerrilla movement reaching a crescendo of violence), sought to deflect some of this passion away from the military. His aim was to place the tail of the tiger in the hands of Perón, who had been coaching the opposition from exile for some eighteen years.

But Perón himself was a military man who upon his return demanded reinstatement to general's rank. What appeal would he have to a people longing for a return to civilian rule? Though Perón was a military man, his government was hardly a military one in the usual sense: It had a wider popular base than any regime in the country's history, and Perón, though he came out of the army, gained power all three times through the electoral route. Thus, the youths who cheered Perón's return, who voted for his surrogate, Héctor A. Cámpora, in May, 1973, and then for Perón himself in October, 1973, could have seen in him their deliverance from the hands of the generals. Had he not been the only one capable of neutralizing the military, at least temporarily? He had remained in office for nine years. Perhaps this time he could put the brass permanently in its place. After Perón returned, everyone was a Peronist—intellectuals, students, the vast middle class that had so passionately hated him. Even most of the guerrillas

declared their allegiance to him (the Montoneros in particular, though the Trotskyist Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo never did line up behind Perón).

The antimilitary feeling was palpable in those days. Officers, even private soldiers, were hooted in the streets. Also, the makeup of the guerrilla movement that had developed in the early 1970's was reflective of a universal desire for permanent change. Middle-class lawyers, architects, physicians, even dentists enlisted to fight. Why would people such as these volunteer their services, since they were not living uncomfortably? What else would induce them to take up the gun but a conviction that this was the only avenue left them?

If one accepts militarism as the dominant obstacle to Argentina's development, the question naturally follows, how is the military to be removed from the political realm? Perón is dead; the guerrilla movement failed. The removal of the military would be a spectacular accomplishment, but not impossible. Having experienced the aftereffects of two coups in Argentina, I am convinced that Argentines could benefit from the concept of political precedent. Since 1928 no president of Argentina, except Perón in his first term and Agustín Justo, who was put into power illegally in 1932, has finished his term of office. That stands as an immense negative precedent.

Precedent is a powerful factor in human psychology. It assures that once something is done that has never been done before, a barrier has been passed making the second time easier. With this in mind one might propose a tentative law for countries such as Argentina. It could be called the Law of Political Degeneration, or some such. It states that the first coup d'état makes the second coup more likely; the second makes the third easier; the third makes the fourth virtually inevitable.

The passing of political power willingly and nonviolently from one group to another remains the most difficult political act. Most countries of the world are still unable to do it. It is an act of high symbolism and significance. For that reason it is almost always surrounded by elaborate ceremony, to reinforce it, to enhance its sacredness.

If we accept the Law of Political Degeneration, we must also accept its reverse. At least it is reasonable to assume that if the peaceful transfer is accomplished once, even in a country where militarism is deeply rooted, the second transfer would be less difficult, the third easier still.

No one appreciated this idea so much as Rómulo Betancourt, president of Venezuela from 1959 to 1964. Virtually since independence Venezuela's history was a mirror of Argentina's: Coup followed coup with dismal regularity. Betancourt, after his election, became convinced that the only way to forestall further intervention was to finish his term of office, then pass the cloak of power to his elected successor. It had never been done before in Venezuela. It proved more than merely difficult: It almost cost Betancourt his life. The FALN, the Communist guerrilla group then so active in Venezuela, evidently realized what Betancourt was up to, for they did everything they could to disrupt the presidential elections of 1963, including terror bombing and assassi-

nations. Their aim was to provoke a military coup. But Betancourt persisted, saw Venezuelans come out to vote despite the danger, then stood by as his successor, Raúl Leoni, was sworn into office.

Leoni was an unremarkable president. But he, too, survived his mandate and passed power on to Raphael Caldera, a Christian Democrat. Two more presidents, both civilians, have followed in order. Venezuela has had neither coup nor serious guerrilla or military threat since Betancourt left office. It is one of the most stable democracies in Latin America.

There is nothing mystical about this. The democratic precedent is not like the invisible shield of Achilles. Rather, the maintenance of civilian administration in a country for periods of eight, to ten, to twelve years—or keeping the military out of politics for that length of time—encourages leaders to turn inward, to concern themselves more with their own technical affairs. A military barred from politics will of necessity come to distance itself from the political arena, until lured or forced to return.

The Chilean military establishment was always among the less political in Latin America. For that reason the tradition of civilian governance grew strong in Chile. (Chileans too used to boast that they were not "South Americans.") The military did not turn political overnight in 1973 when it overthrew the government of Salvador Allende. It had been previously politicized by the civilians who wanted to use it for their own purposes. Allende politicized it at the top by bringing military men into his cabinet; the MIR, a left-wing guerrilla group, tried to subvert the rank-and-file, especially of the Navy. Patria y Libertad, a right-wing terrorist group, was working on the mid-level officers, urging their intervention, as was the CIA. The Christian Democrats, throughout 1973, were agitating for a coup against Allende's Popular Unity government. It was a wonder a Pinochet did not emerge sooner.

The Brazilian military establishment was likewise brought into the political arena by elements that propagandized the rank-and-file, and the officer corps acted in 1964, activated by its own perception of the situation, out of its own self-defense. Other politicizers of the Brazilian armed forces were the upper-middle-class Brazilians, newspaper owners, and industrialists, who clamored for intervention against the leftish government of João Goulart. So far they have gotten over fourteen years of military rule, much more than they bargained for.

In Argentina, as in many other Latin American countries, the military is not a free agent but acts in response to popular pressures. General Videla is not unpopular in Argentina but he is not as popular as he was when he first came to power. If the past is prologue, his successor will be someone like him, briefly popular, briefly in power. Until the Argentines themselves decide they have had enough, realize that economic stability and ideal political progress on both the national and international plane must be made up of slow, piecemeal gains, the fruit of compromise between parties and small sacrifices on the part of individuals, they will always be wondering what has gone wrong, why Argentina's star has fallen. 