

SOCIOLOGY OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES

Sociology in Argentina

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Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown, by **Javier Auyero** and **Debora Swistun**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 208 pp. \$20.95 paper. ISBN: 9780195372939.

Una Historia del Libro Judío, by **Alejandro Dujovne**. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2014. 304 pp. \$17.48 paper. ISBN: 9789876294362.

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Seguridad Privada: La Mercantilización de la Vigilancia y la Protección en la Argentina Contemporánea, by **Federico Lorenc Valcarce**. Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2014. 256 pp. \$18.36 paper. ISBN: 9788415295785.

Emprendedores del Diseño, by **Paula Miguel**. Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 2013. 224 pp. \$11.67 paper. ISBN: 9789502321844.

Política y Transparencia, by **Sebastián Pereyra**. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2013. 328 pp. \$16.71 paper. ISBN: 9789876292665.

Burocracia Plebeya: La Vida Íntima del Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, by **Luisina Perelmiter**. San Martín: Unsam Edita, 2016. 252 pp. \$12.00 paper. ISBN: 9789874027153.

Las Sospechas del Dinero, by **Ariel Wilkis**. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2013. 192 pp. \$14.93 paper. ISBN: 9789501289138.

A Brief Historical Introduction

In a couple of recent review essays in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Andrew Abbott adopts the nom de plume "Barbara Celarent" to discuss two books first published in Argentina, one from the nineteenth century, Domingo Sarmiento's *Facundo*, and a second one from the late 1970s, Gino Germani's *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism*. Abbott uses the first text to remind sociologists not to lose sight of how good social science is "inextricably bound up with fiction, history,

travelogue, polemic, and sheer egomania" (Celarent 2011:723); from Germani, he highlights the multi-method character of the relationship between social structure and the style of political mobilization known as Peronism (Celarent 2013).

We want to continue this work and extend this well-informed genealogical foray into the history of Argentinean sociology into the present. In the first section of this essay, we briefly expand on Abbott's insights to show the imprinting power of Germani's scholarship over the first two generations of Argentinean sociologists. In the second section, we provide an overview of the successive generations that have restructured the local field, as well as some current main topics of research, and of how contemporary approaches relate to and depart from the foundational topics and logics of inquiry.

Sociology became a degree-granting department at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) in 1958, the same year in which the University started offering degrees in economics and psychology, part of a modernizing and rationalizing project (Blanco 2006). Germani and his team aimed to establish a clear break with the past, orienting Argentinean sociology within the best-known scholarly currents of the time and developing an original line of thought about the country as based in empirical studies. The autonomy of sociology was less a struggle against other disciplines, like history, economics, or literary studies, with which it shared projects and institutional spaces, but a fight against a tradition it deemed to be parochial and obsolete (Blanco and Jackson 2015). Although the international character of the circulation of ideas had until then been limited to a small circle during the 1960s, it now permeated the research agendas of the newly established degree. At the same time, Germani's team developed a series of empirical inquiries, orienting the discipline against both essayism and "pure" social theory. This line of research produced an imprinting effect in providing an explanation for what were the defining problems of Argentina as a modern nation.

If, like Alexander (1987) states, the function of the classics is to provide a common reference and a horizon of intelligibility for the creation of a discipline, Germani's

research established the parameters. This tradition is organized around two axes, which intersect in a guiding hypothesis. The first is the profoundly unstable character of Argentina's social structure, which was tied to its deep and abrupt modernization.¹ The second is the resulting instability of the political regime, which made itself evident in the emergence of Peronism.² Germani's thesis was paradoxical: while Peronism resembled traditional forms of authority and grouping, its rapid ascent was directly related to the accelerated modernization of Argentinean society.

For the first two generations of Argentinean sociologists, affirming Germani's validity did not mean being in complete agreement with him but rather working within the same set of questions. Disputes over the origins of Peronism produced what is considered the most important sociology of its time. Part of what explains the persistence of these foundational lines of inquiry is the close relationship between sociology and the political moment. During the military dictatorship (1976 to 1983) many sociologists were either killed or exiled after participating intellectually in generating social change; key parts of what fueled their participation were set positions on how to best understand the relationship between Peronism and the working class and the relationship of the country with foreign powers and the international markets.

The second generation of sociologists was very much dispersed until the democratic transition started in 1983. Under the military dictatorship, Argentinean sociology survived either as a clandestine enterprise driven by study groups outside the university or thanks to those exiled abroad. During the 1980s, many of these sociologists came back to the country and built the new agenda for sociology aimed at internationalizing and updating what was being taught, establishing a curriculum heavily anchored by classic and contemporary social theory (with more continental than U.S. scholarship). The funding of private research centers

¹ The key text is Germani's *Estructura Social de la Argentina* (1955).

² See Germani, *Política y Sociedad en una Época de Transición* (1965).

by international foundations was also central. This contributed to the expansion of research topics, which now focused on understanding the political violence of the past decade and understanding the conditions necessary for the establishment of a democratic society.

A New Argentinean Sociology?

If Germani set the parameters for the development of an autonomous sociology in the late 1950s and the generation that returned from political exile modernized it during the 1980s and 1990s, we want now to call attention to a third wave that was established in the late 2000s thanks to the expansion of the National Council of Science and Technology (CONICET) and the creation of new doctoral programs at the UBA, at private research institutes, but most importantly at other national universities in metropolitan Buenos Aires, which also established new bachelor's degree programs in the social sciences. The combination of these factors allowed many PhD students to be fully funded by fellowships from the CONICET, and it also attracted young scholars who had moved to France or the United States to study sociology or to Brazil to study anthropology to return to Argentina to conduct research and to circulate what they had learned.

These developments resulted in the multiplication of spaces where knowledge was produced as well as the loss of the symbolic centrality of the UBA. The returning generation of PhDs, including the anthropologists who had been central in the training of a new generation of sociological ethnographers, slowly converged with those who had earned their doctorates at home to make up a new generation with a style of its own. These "older siblings" took on the mentorship role of an absent generation that had been killed or exiled during the last dictatorship and that would have replaced those in the second modernizing wave. In doing so, they helped to establish new doctoral curricula while returning to some of the founding themes of Argentinean sociology, namely, the transformations of the social structure and its impact on political dynamics, as well as the changes within Peronism. Among these transitional

scholars, Auyero (2000) used the works of Goffman, Tilly, and Bourdieu to show how political patronage cannot be reduced to an instrumental exchange of favors for votes; Kessler moved from the study of the impoverished middle classes (Minujin and Kessler 1995) to the study of the perception of violence and danger among the same population (Kessler 2009); Merklen (2005) analyzed the relationship between the lives of those excluded from the labor market and politics and new forms of political participation like occupying lands or rioting; and Svampa (2001) studied the transformation of the forms of sociability among the upper middle class as well as new forms of political participation among the poor (Svampa and Pereyra 2003). Through these "older siblings," the local field deepened its dialogue with what was new in social sciences abroad, not only because of their direct relationships with central scholars in metropolitan fields like France or the United States, but also because of their connection with a loose network of Argentinean scholars who continued their careers abroad but kept producing social science research about the country.

This felicitous conjunction of institutional conditions, intellectual traditions, and spaces for the circulation of ideas helped to breed a third generation of scholars that redefined local scholarship against many of the key features that had once defined Argentinean sociology (including its close relationship to political action). Though this scholarship is still interested in some of the key issues on the public agenda, researchers show this interest through studies that are more rigorous, methodical, and constrained. For example, scholars study the state (with a lower-case "s") through the analysis of the networks through which the political elite is recruited (Vommaro et al. 2015), the porous character of public and private policing (Lorenc Valcarce 2014), the everyday plebeian way of distributing public aid (Perelmiter 2016), or the role of economists in political decision-making (Heredia 2015). Even when undertaking the study of "urgent" topics such as inflation (Heredia 2015), public safety and violence, or corruption (Pereyra 2013), scholars conceptualize them as "public problems," themselves the result of conflict among competing actors, fighting to frame them as such.

Unlike in political science or economics, research is conducted without taking a normative stance, even if most of the scholarship we address here is attentive to public issues. In contrast to other national fields, disciplinary autonomy does not result in an abrupt cut with how arguments are couched in the humanities. It is fairly common to encounter historiographical references, thorough archival work, and references to literary texts and other cultural artifacts, as well as the use of metaphors and evocative language.

Sociology in a Minor Key

If we look closely at the corpus of their production, we find that this third generation of Argentinean sociologists conducts research using multiple qualitative methods (participant observation, archival work, interviews) in order to reconstruct how agents find meaning in what they do as well as the networks that organize said meaning. Their theoretical framework combines tools from political, economic, and cultural sociology. The result is detailed but enriching, since the accumulation of cases and comparisons among them produce a more precise and less reductive version of reality.

This generation has also researched subjects little explored by the first two generations, like the production and circulation of cultural artifacts. For instance, in *Emprendedores del Diseño*, Paula Miguel (2013) examines the production of fashion to answer a fascinating question: How is it that in a context in which none of the key elements to explain the surge of a creative economy are present, diverse agents have been able to produce a successful fashion circuit and to reinvent a decimated industry anew? While the literature on the relationship between regional development and creative industries has focused on what has to be in place (an industrial atmosphere) in order for creativity to flourish, Miguel's case examines how a niche fashion industry emerged after a decade of recession for the traditional textile industry to observe how the 2001 crisis spurred actors to rebuild the industry. The result has been the development of a boutique-centered design district, similar to what we have come to expect in global cities, but emerging through a very different trajectory.

Focusing on young local entrepreneurs who had attended the UBA's School of Design and had a hard time integrating into the labor market, Miguel shows how these designers slowly developed their own brands and, in doing so, built up a series of social relationships with small workshops and new pools of labor. They also allied with city officials to support the successful development of a local design retail district, which resulted in new tourism destinations. When compared to other Argentinean books looking at the period, what is salient is the focus not on the resistance to neoliberalism, but rather the author's astute understanding of how the 2001 crisis was also a key moment to study the de- and re-structuration of a field. For U.S. readers, the book is an interesting case to put in dialogue with the work of Allen Scott or Harvey Molotch.

Inspired by the work of Viviana Zelizer (herself an Argentinean who pursued her sociological career in the United States), Ariel Wilkis investigates the everyday and affective use of money to dispel long-held suspicions about the origin and use of money among the poor.³ In *Las Sospechas del Dinero*, Wilkis observes that salaries are just one (and a scarce one at that) of the many sources of financing for poor people's households and should be included within a larger economy that includes family loans or aid, public cash transfers, political favors, illegal profits, and also growing bank and financial services. What we learn about how money is used has less to do with the economy than with morality: the author shows that money is a medium for social relations and that how the money is appreciated or used depends on its source. Each chapter reconstructs the circulation and meaning of a different type of money (money donated, gained through political engagement, sacrificed, earned, built up, loaded). Building on Bourdieu, the author proposes the concept of "moral capital" to account for how people measure, compare, and constantly evaluate moral virtues from which money can or cannot flow. In this book, Bourdieu and Zelizer

³ An English version of the book is forthcoming with Stanford University Press. Its title will be *The Moral Power of Money: Morality and Economy in the Life of the Urban Poor*.

meet in metropolitan Buenos Aires to explain the importance of moral dilemmas involved in consumption and everyday material survival in marginalized suburbs, in a bold departure from a single, strategic conception of money and from an impoverished conceptualization of the poor and their financial skills.

How to Innovate Theoretically from the Periphery

Though modest in theoretical scope, we can read in this scholarship how the confluence of diverse and distinctive influences results in novel claims. Given the scale, the equal distance to many metropolitan centers, and the travels back and forth produced by exile and study abroad, Argentinean sociology continues, as Borges (1964) wrote for national literature at large, combining many western traditions without choosing one over the other. This mixture results in an original theoretical synthesis and a resistance to turn the study of Argentina into merely a case for the application of *one* imported analytic protocol. We can find hand in hand in this scholarship authors that usually don't go together in other contexts.

In *Seguridad Privada: La Mercantilización de la Vigilancia y la Protección en la Argentina Contemporánea*, Federico Lorenc Valcarce seamlessly combines Latour and Bourdieu to examine the growth of private security services in Argentina. Debunking some of the myths anchored in the strong ideological opposition between the state and the market in Latin America as well as a more specific concern about the development of private security as a sign of the retreat of the state monopoly over legitimate violence, the author examines security services to stress the complementarity of private and public institutions and agents in this industry. His research shows that in Argentina, private security services are less focused on punishment and more on discouraging crime; they are less attentive to people and private property than to goods and corporate property. Even though it is common for former police and military personnel to run these companies, what is sociologically relevant is not the small number of conversions from

previous agents of the dictatorial regime into private agents (which had been the focus of journalistic coverage), but rather the badly paid nature of public careers in the security industry. Through this book, Lorenc Valcarce engages in debates about the reformulation of the role of the state, considering the emergence of a new market, the framing of previous state services into market commodities, and the emergence of new private agents that cater to that market.

Similarly, in *Cuando los Economistas Alcanzaron el Poder*, Mariana Heredia combines French and U.S. economic sociology, studies of expertise, and local scholarship on state-making to examine the uncertainties and unexpected results of economic decision-making. While the rise of economists has been frequently understood as the triumph of instrumental rationality or as resulting from the enforcement of an inextinguishable global network, Heredia shows the long and laborious framing of inflation as Argentina's central domestic economic problem, tracing how diverse attempts to control local prices slowly cemented economists' role as the most authorized experts. The book presents how these experiments in taming inflation become more and more ambitious and at the same time dependent on foreign aid and their growth in scope until they involved the transformation of the entire society. By analyzing the production of the 1991 Convertibility Plan, which pegged the value of the Argentinean peso to the U.S. dollar and was taken for a decade to be a miraculous solution, the author reveals the policy's clear contradiction with neoliberal mandates as well as strong opposition from powerful actors. According to the author, the intimate history of Argentina's integration into the global economic order demonstrates that networks are not only made through subordination and discipline, but also through creativity and betrayal. Instead of seeing neoliberalism as a *deus ex machina*, Heredia exposes its localized nuances to display the weaknesses and strengths of human decision-making.

Sebastián Pereyra's *Política y Transparencia* draws on Garfinkel, Lefort, and Hirschman as well as French pragmatic sociology to show how demands about corruption

redefine what counts and does not count as a democratic political regime. Starting from a clear differentiation between corruption as an analytical phenomenon and as a public problem, the author reconstructs the centrality gained by this concern in Argentina since the 1980s through an analysis of financial support from the United States, the irruption of new juridical activists, and the rise of investigative journalism. His research shows how participants frame the problem and the strategies they deploy to solve it. Pereyra argues that the corruption battle is central to democratic legitimacy in a very different way from what is stated by anti-corruption agents. These are always suspicious of politicians and high-ranking public officials and see them as the main culprits of crime; this view excludes any consideration of their partners in the private sector. The focus on the individual behavior of public authorities in the construction of corruption as *the* main public problem, the author shows, has modified the conception of politics in parallel to the adoption of market reforms. By creating a distance between citizens and elected representatives, the focus on corruption has effectively replaced public discussion of the legitimacy of political conflict and the goals of public policy. Thus, in their centrality as a social problem, corruption claims have pernicious effects, going hand in hand with the denouncement of political practices and the disengagement from public concerns by the middle classes.

Luisina Perelmiter's *Burocracia Plebeya: La Vida Íntima del Ministerio de Desarrollo Social* combines Weber, Latour, and Laclau to study the practices of what she calls "plebeian bureaucracy" in the Ministry of Social Welfare under the last Peronist government (especially during the 2003 to 2009 period). Facing a growing journalistic literature on the inefficiencies of the Argentinean state and how to correct them, the author chooses to suspend all moral judgment and instead to do research on how the local public bureaucracy actually works. She did her ethnography on one of the most criticized ministries during the Kirchners' administrations: the one distributing public aid,

which was directed by Alicia Kirchner, then-President Nestor Kirchner's sister. Shadowing middle and lower level civil officers, Perelmiter shows their ambitious attempts to solve a paradoxical problem: to ensure the presence of the national state in a huge and unequal territory while gaining an intimate proximity with the poor. In reconstructing the intense everyday engagement of officers with the population they are expected to serve, she analyzes the unique ways in which the Ministry organizes this engagement: full of affective gestures, attentive to personalized and sometimes extreme efforts at problem-solving, and even reluctant toward established hierarchies. She then shows how all of these features were in tension with other demands by the Ministry itself, such as the imperative of formal service, legal procedures and state responsibilities, or the expectations of aid recipients. In order to extend her analysis to other public administration spaces, she coins the concept "plebeian bureaucracy" to make sense of her description of the passionate street bureaucrats' practices as well as to theorize beyond the local context.

Sometimes the novelty is less about the combination of theorists and more about an approach that is seldom matched in an area of study or an empirical object. That is the case with Alejandro Dujovne's *Una Historia del Libro Judío*. In this study, Dujovne uses field theory to make sense of an ex-centric study object (the Jewish book) to show how identity is not a given or a background factor that explains how agents act but rather is a field made up of many agents fighting to define its legitimacy. Drawing on archives, memoirs, and oral history, he distinguishes two periods, one in which Buenos Aires was a receptacle for the import of Yiddish books and a second in which texts in circulation were local translations of "Jewish-themed" works into Spanish. Dujovne makes explicit three competing relationships between language (Yiddish, Hebrew, Judeo-Español) and Jewish identity, evidenced through competition in the editorial field. His conceptualization of the idea of field does not stop at Bourdieu; Dujovne successfully incorporates, expands, and refines

some of the claims of his disciples in France (Sapiro, Casanova) to investigate the interface between national and transnational fields, showing how the national Jewish field was refracted in international occurrences like the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel.

Argentinean Sociology beyond the River Plate

This new Argentinean sociology is not only produced near the River Plate, but also abroad. Despite this geographic dispersion, we can find some common characteristics that link the bodies of scholarship, which can be partially explained by the intensification of exchanges and mutual projects across the equator. A case in point is how, in constructing his objects of study, Auyero (2009, 2012, 2015) integrates the dispositional approaches of Bourdieu with the formal-relational concerns of Tilly to show how everyday political domination is reproduced and contested at sites such as a welfare state office, a school, or a polluted shantytown. In his most celebrated book, *Flammable*, Javier Auyero and his co-author, Debora Swistun, pioneer for urban poverty studies the examination of the degraded environment in which poor people live their lives and the way they systematically fail to make sense of it.

The authors present the lives of the inhabitants of "Flammable," a shantytown in metropolitan Buenos Aires surrounded by a petrochemical compound, a polluted river, and an unmonitored landfill. Auyero and Swistun advance in two directions: theoretically, they focus on what they call "toxic uncertainty"; methodologically, they aim to underscore both the endogenous and exogenous factors that bring this about. The book contributes to and goes beyond other studies of the habitus by Bourdieusian scholars like Wacquant or Desmond. The authors refer to the relationship between habitus and the particular social space of the contaminated shantytown, which they call the habitat. They show the generational, occupational, and spatial divisions between the many inhabitants, the disjuncture between the idealized past and the realities of the present, and the many agents—with differential

symbolic and material resources—competing to define the situation. The presence of so many agents engenders a profusion of representations that helps to produce "toxic uncertainty" instead of what should be a transparent relationship between a muddled social world and how the poor perceive it.

In *Soybeans and Power: Genetically Modified Crops, Environmental Politics, and Social Movements in Argentina*, Pablo Lapegna combines an agrarian study of socioeconomic structural change with a detailed political ethnography concerned with the meaning-making practices of those affected by the negative environmental impact of the soy boom. Drawing on theories of agrarian political economy, he scrutinizes the strategies of global biotechnology corporations by zooming in on the sweeping expansion of genetically modified (GM) soybeans in Argentina and the role of local agribusinesses in that process. This analysis (and herein lies one of the contributions of the book) is combined with an ethnographic approach to the social suffering of the peasants and rural populations living in the places where GM soybeans take root. He tackles the question of why peasants affected by toxic agrochemicals and marginalized by the expansion of agribusiness were actively contentious in the early 2000s but then found obstacles to mobilizing to address these problems between the mid-2000s and the early 2010s.

Lapegna weaves together social movement studies and cultural sociology to analyze processes of mobilization and demobilization. In a fresh and original approach, he combines Goffman's insights about impression management, debates about recognition, theories of performative speech acts, and scholarship on clientelism to identify the ways in which material concerns and meaning-making processes intertwine to create obstacles for contention and inform peasants' strategies of negotiation and accommodation when they face the negative social and environmental consequences of GM crops. This dialogue between critical agrarian studies, global ethnography, social movement scholarship, research on clientelism, and environmental studies is a rare find.

This relatively heterodox approach also accounts for the choice of non-conventional

study objects,⁴ as is the case in *Freedom from Work: Embracing Financial Self-Help in the United States and Argentina*, which examines the fans of financial success books. In this study, Daniel Fridman approaches neoliberalism not from the point of view of more visible policy reform or expert economic knowledge, but rather through the mundane world of ordinary people trying to refashion themselves into autonomous subjects by becoming savvy investors. Usually under the radar, popular financial advice coming from the United States makes its way into Argentina in the form of best-sellers supported by lively groups of local readers that cultivate networks of fans. Fridman did not write a traditional story of American imperial cultures dominating Latin America but rather explored a more complex process in which conscious practitioners have to actively translate financial advice to make it fit their unstable economic contexts.

Again, the multiplicity of influences, the reluctance to fit under one sub-disciplinary paradigm, and the detailed empirical sociological work that nevertheless rescues references from other disciplines are the features shared by this new Argentinean sociology with contributions both from those at home and abroad.

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⁴ This phenomenon can be also seen in other recent books by Argentinean scholars working in the United States; for instance, Boczkowski (2010) combines science and technology studies and organizational sociology to examine the transformation of news in the transition to its digital production and dissemination, and Benzecry (2011) studies practices of emotional attachment in opera, a product historically thought of as sober, discreet, and high-culture, aiming to bridge the study of distinction and recognition of Bourdieu and the music-centered sociology of Hennion and DeNora.