

# **From Immigrant to Citizen through State-Run Education: The Symbolic Structure of Public Education in Argentina during the Wave of Mass Italian Immigration (1880-1920s)**

*Recipient of the 2002 Kroeber Prize for the best Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley*

*Marisa L. Wilson, Oxford University*

## **Introduction**

The process of modernization may produce so great an imbalance between one group and another, that many ethnic groups may become assimilated to another language and culture. This can happen, however, only if governmental policy also works to favor one group over another, particularly with regard to the medium of education in the schools. [Brass 1991:34]

From emigration to immigration, identities left behind in an old world are often reformulated by the social, political, and economic conditions found in the new national milieu. For the first-generation Italian immigrant in a modernizing society such as Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century, assimilation into these national arenas was crucial for future success. However, this pending prosperity ultimately rested on the immigrant's children, who were impelled to not only integrate completely, but often to accept a new national Argentine identity over an ethnic Italian identity. As Jose Moya (1998) has explained in his study of Spanish immigrants in Buenos Aires, second-generation immigrant children face a "dual personality," especially contradictory when an identity tied to the land of origin differs and/or conflicts with that established and enforced in the new land of birth (see also Nascimbene 1986). Italian immigrants to Argentina (and those from other European countries) were encouraged to assimilate, but their sons and daughters were actually coerced into yielding loyalty to a single collective national identity over other individual identities (particularly ethnic or class-based identities). Through national education—a state-run attempt to establish and maintain a "national culture"—"undesirable" immigrants (such as those from Southern Italy) could, according to some social scientists of the time, be converted into nationally-cultured citizens (Schneider 2000).

Simple symbolic manifestations of national identity, such as a head of state, the national flag, and a national anthem are normalized in every modern nation (Birch 1989). These symbols are overt and often admired as representations of collectivity. In Argentina, singing of the national hymn was made obligatory in all schools in 1900, and was followed by the required celebration of the “jura de la Bandera” [day of the flag] in 1909 (Braslavsky 1992). Yet the correlation between these educational mandates and the period of mass Italian immigration is not coincidental; the explicit use of these national symbols in public education may actually indicate a more covert symbolism found in the schools, such as a law passed during the same period as those cited above mandating the use of patriotic themes within all areas of the curriculum, even in math problems (Braslavsky 1992).

This paper demonstrates two forms of symbolic educational policies which leading social scientists deemed essential for coercing the masses into the established national Argentine culture: 1) the literary national idiom (Castilian) was favored over all other spoken languages and posed as a symbol of national linguistic and ideological collectivity, and 2) the national culture and customs were introduced to children as the “official theology” (Braslavsky 1992:113)—a patriotic religion which symbolically incorporated the national histories, legends (“popular mythologies” in Braslavsky’s terms), and ideologies into the curriculum. I will refer to this “official theology” as a “civil religion” following other Durkheimian theorists. I will later emphasize that, in addition to the national negation of languages and dialects spoken by immigrants in their homes and communities, an Argentine civil religion propagated in schools often contradicted individual and ethno-cultural identities that immigrant children had to leave at home.

In sociologist Geoffrey Benjamin’s (1988) reference to the “classical fallacy” of the nation-state, symbolic representations of national collectivity (e.g. language and religion) need only the rhetoric of social scientists for the “trick to be complete” (Braslavsky 1992:41). Masked by symbolism in the schools, the underlying political agenda of this Argentine “institutional order” was imbued with the predominant ideological constructs of the time—that is, a particular type of xenophobic conservatism propagated by certain contemporary social scientists. As in many other nation-states during this period, elite dependence on new social “sciences” such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and the rising “educational science” of pedagogy (Alcorta 1916), resulted in a collaboration between elite political leaders and those social scientists and pedagogues who shared the same conservative ideological frameworks. The two predominant ideologies were “liberalismo autoritario” (Nascimbene 1986), or the positive outlook of “infinite progress” in developing a modern industrial Argentina, and the incorporation of Darwin’s theory of natural selection into the social sciences in the form of social Darwinism.

The creation and symbolic manipulation of a national culture in Argentine education has many historical counterparts; not surprisingly, institutionalized cultural conformity is present in our own nationalized educational system. Similar to

dissensions that some Argentines posed against the educational policies of the time, an argument was made against the United States Trilateral Commission in the 1960s and '70s. This association (among whose members included former U.S. President Jimmy Carter) regarded schools as "institutions responsible for indoctrinating the young" and with the goal of "maintaining Western capitalism's cultural hegemony" (Chomsky 2000). During its inauguration, Noam Chomsky charged that the Trilateral Commission restricted the possibilities of independent thought by implementing institutional control and coercive tactics (Chomsky 2000). Thus, in both modern nations (the U.S. and Argentina), national identities contrived in public schools are as exemplary of elite control as they are essential for the future citizen's integration into a state-run society.

In this paper I will emphasize that educational control held by Argentine elites was aimed at ostracizing certain groups, such as "undesirable" Italian immigrants. The first section will not only identify the controlling (academic and political) communities that incorporated their ideological biases into Argentine educational policy, but also demonstrate how Argentine elites, like those of the U.S. Trilateral Commission, advocated the construction of a new national cultural hegemony in the public schools. The second and third sections will demonstrate how this controlling community used symbolism in the schools to coerce second-generation immigrants into cherishing both the national idiom and a new civil religion.

The ideological collaboration between a select group of "respected" social scientists and those in power played a dominant role in the structure of the Argentine education system at the turn of the century. As a majority of the students were immigrant children, many from Italy, the ideological role of this institution was a crucial factor in the process of nation-building. However, as evidenced by the number of counter-hegemonic pedagogical writings of the period, this symbolic attempt to "Argentinizar" future citizens—that is, to replace existent identities with a single national identity by indoctrinating a "national culture"—may not have been as successful as some social scientists hoped for.

### **Argentine National Identity: A Culture Mandated by Social Science and the State**

When paradigms held by intellectuals are shared by the state, covert control over the mass population is merely a matter of discourse. The dominant ideology in Argentina during this period was exclusory, yet it was shared by heroic national figures. One such hero was Domingo F. Sarmiento, president of Argentina from 1868-74, who spoke of the educational system as sacred for every man and his family, his native land, and for humankind. Many of Sarmiento's speeches targeted his religious audience, comparing the position of the school within the community to that of the church's high altar, and calling for all men and women to prostrate themselves before its patriotic agenda (Devoto and Rosoli 1985).

Sarmiento was as much a national icon to the Argentine people in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as President Abraham Lincoln was to citizens of the United States. Like Lincoln, Sarmiento brought about great changes in his society, especially in developing a previously non-existent educational system with the goal of integrating and educating as many immigrants as possible. Yet, while his contribution to Argentine society was rightly celebrated by later citizens, Sarmiento's national philosophy also influenced the ideological direction of later intellectuals and leaders. He was concerned with modernity and a positivistic stance, where national education replaces the national church. Sarmiento also, however, followed the contemporary trend of social Darwinism that called for the making of a "nueva raza" born of the Argentine people and assisted by symbolism used in the official schools (Nascimbene 1986).

During his time, Sarmiento was a key manager in the "migration business," attempting to attract more northern European immigrants than "undesirable" southern Europeans (Southern Italians and Spanish). However, as the first influx of mass immigration (1880-1920s) began, a great proportion of these "undesirables," mainly illiterate southern Italians, immigrated to Argentina, and to Buenos Aires in particular. Since, as was true in the U.S., intellectuals were the "genuine ruling class" (Adelman 1992), elites called on Sarmientian sociologists and psychologists to solve the growing concern over Argentina's "social question": the "labor unrest, terror, criminality, housing and health problems" which these southern European immigrants wrought on Argentine society (Adelman 1992).

In addition to passing the "ley de Defensa Social" in 1910, aimed at maintaining the social order in Argentine society, new educational policies gave intellectuals an opportunity to apply nationalist theories to second-generation immigrant children. As Sarmiento and later presidents dictated, the educational system was not only regarded as the "fundamental base of all social order" but an available "means of social control" (Schutter 1943).

According to the Argentine elite, the new "other" was the "corrupt" uneducated immigrant; as Amancio Alcorta writes in his treatise on Argentine secondary education (1916:214): "el barbaro es el ignorante" [the barbarian is the ignorant]. A prejudice against all illiterates was embedded in many of the pedagogical studies and policies, rationalized by the concept of national progress. Since 42% of the school population in 1917 were dubbed illiterate (Montgomery 1920), the matter was not of little importance; however, this concern, along with the rise of conservative intellectuals' influence on educational policy, resulted in a public education system that instructed and assimilated as many immigrants as possible into the conservative nationalist milieu.

Despite the claim of racial neutrality, Dr. E. S. Zeballos, president of the National Bureau of Education in Argentina, and other intellectuals directed their new policies towards educating the majority of immigrants who came from southern Italy during this time period.<sup>1</sup> Since the proportion of Italian immigrants over other

European immigrants (mostly Spanish) was substantial, the Italian presence in Buenos Aires was a significant factor in shaping the evolving industrial society.

However, a majority of the politically, socio-economically, and regionally-diverse Italian population in Argentina did not hold strong ties to their “ethnic” Italian identities. Unlike in the mid-19th century when most Italian immigrants to Argentina were politically focused, educated, and from central and northern “modern” Italy, most later Italian immigrants were lower-to-middle class uneducated workers from central and rural southern Italy. The “*importanza numerica*” [high number] (Menendez 1928) of this later group of immigrants incited fear in many conservative nationalists—as we will see, they were the primary focus of the “social question.” Since many of these Italian immigrants (especially the second-generation children) did not identify with their ethnic identities, they were more vulnerable to a pre-packed, state-sponsored identity.

The controlling task of replacing ethnic identities with a single national identity was not quite as difficult in Argentina as it has been in other immigrant societies. Upon arrival in Buenos Aires and other Argentine cities, Italian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries not only encountered economic opportunity, but also political agency; as I have previously indicated, from the outset, these newcomers preferred class ties over ethnic, drawn by the political and economic value of the labor movement. Italian literacy was not a high priority for many who had left an Italian regional world in which artisan and professional capabilities were valued over intellectualism.<sup>2</sup> For this reason (and for monetary reasons, of course), these newcomers did not send their children to the Italian private schools, preferring to acquire “educational capital” (Schneider 2000:116) by sending their children to the public Argentine schools. Perhaps they did not realize how much education was prized by the Argentine elite as a tool for influencing and sometimes re-constructing the ideological viewpoints and affiliations of the next generation.

Though Italians made up a majority of the middle to working-class immigrant population, later Italian immigrants to Argentina were commonly grouped within the ethnically diverse “illiterate” population. Along with the northern/southern Italian dichotomy, which already classified the latter as “undesirables,” working class Italians acquired a reputation for their radicalism; the anarchists were especially threatening to the elites’ value of national progress. During this period, most anarchist and syndicalist leaders in Italy were forced to emigrate, and a large proportion decided to find a new life in Argentina. Because of this growing leftist influence, it was even more imperative to replace “dangerous” and “undesirable” immigrant identities with the national identity identified with all “cultured” Argentine citizens.

Unlike in the United States, where the question of educational policy is predominantly under the jurisdiction of each state legislature, all schools in Argentina (a country which some deemed “the United States of the South” (Nascimbene 1986:77)) have been under national control since the incorporation of a National

Council of Education in 1881 (Schutter 1943:78).<sup>3</sup> Though this situation has been widely protested and partially relaxed since then (especially within Argentine universities), xenophobic fears during this time period drove the search for solutions to the “social question,” and many accepted the intellectuals’ rhetoric advocating nationalized schools for “el mayor bien de la comunidad” [the good of the community] (Zeballos 1908:17). Yet this fear of the “other” was masked by political and intellectual discourse.

In addition to secularism and modernity, the concept of democracy was rhetorically utilized by these intellectuals, who followed Sarmiento’s coined phrase: “education for democracy,” promoting an “enlightened citizenry who knew their rights” (Schutter 1943:53). For instance, the rhetoric surrounding two mandates passed in the late 19th century claimed that these strategically-named laws furthered the cause of democratic teaching. The first was the Law of Common Education of 1884, which refrained from the compulsory teaching of Catholicism in order to “open the doors” to all types of immigrants, but which was actually aimed at attracting those elite immigrants who shared the same secularist intellectualism as positivist elites in Argentina (Schutter 1943:62). Those who resisted claimed that this bill, closely related to the controversial law that legalized civil matrimony and secular education, neglected and disrespected those immigrants who did hold religious affiliations. These dissenters countered the law’s hegemony, maintaining that the underlying reasons for the proposition were prejudices that elites held against the large religious immigrant population (who were, as can be expected, predominantly Italian lower-class immigrants—many even attended their own separate Italian Catholic schools, called salesianos). By representing religious faiths deemed “superstitious” by those who merited the “truths” of positivism (Nascimbene 1986:77), these immigrants were targeted by the Law of Common Education, for secular schools established by this law naturally benefited a majority of immigrants who strove to assimilate.

The second law was again strategically entitled the “Ley Sobre la Libertad de la Ensenanza” [Free Education Law], which guaranteed the right to learn without political or religious instigation and the right for all schools, both private and public, to be regarded as educational enterprises by the law. This meant that intellectual elites kept strict control over the “neutrality” of the educational curriculum while incorporating a national primary school exam that underhandedly required all previously-autonomous private schools (such as those run by the Italian mutual aid societies) to incorporate the established national curriculum. One contemporary critic sarcastically exclaimed: “Libertad de aprender! Donde existe?” [“Freedom to learn! Where does it exist?”] (Nascimbene 1986:77), cynically dubbing this national test as “the ridiculous farce called the annual exam” (Sans and Lajouane 1896).

Most critics claimed that the title of the law, “Libertad de la Ensenanza” [Free Education Law] was only meant to deceive. R. Monner Sans, a contemporary critic, claimed that these ideological influences and fears of revolt preclude the child from expressing “la inteligencia de que Dios le ha dotado” [the intelligence that God gave

him]. In his work, published in 1896, this more liberal scholar believes that the ultimate goal in the educational system should be to “strongly eliminate the theorists” from the act of Argentine educational policymaking (Sans and Lajouane 1896:54).

What pedagogues termed “neutral education” actually meant an attempt to exorcise all those in society who questioned the status quo.<sup>4</sup> Though intellectuals’ rhetoric sometimes has drastic results on the masses, the effects of such language as the “Escuela neutra” and the “Ley Sobre la Libertad de la Ensenanza” in Argentine pedagogical writings were covert, since a majority of immigrant families already opted to send their children to public schools. These immigrants wanted to “make it in America” (“Fare l’America”) (Baily 1999:93), and could obtain “educational capital” (Schneider 2000:116) if their children were quickly integrated into Argentine society. The effects of this rhetorical appeal to public schools were therefore not drastic in any tangible fashion; however, language used by conservative intellectuals determined the ideological structure of the Argentine public school curriculum and guided many second-generation immigrants into a system that claimed to advocate racial heterogeneity but that actually incorporated ideological homogeneity.

As emphasized previously, a greater fear held by the conservative elite was that of those immigrants who held strong political views rather than ethnic ties. The growing immigrant population established a (previously non-existent) middle-class in society, and for many (such as southern Italians), the labor movement provided political and economic agency to individuals who left their homelands as members of the poorer classes. Since political radicals were among this diverse group, Argentine elites’ fear of a middle-class revolt greatly influenced their policy-making. National control over schools (especially primary and secondary education) meant that these conservative nationalists could instill their ideologies in the mindset of second-generation immigrants (as one scholar wrote at the time, “educar es hacer hombre al hombre” [to educate is to make a man a man] (Tobar 1910)).

Educated in the public school system, developing “hombres” studied from a curriculum saturated with conservative nationalism. Elites attempted to “argentinizar” (Diaz 1915) these children by re-formulating a new cultural identity tied to the Argentine nation, often contrary to individual identities established in their homes and communities. As is the case with most second-generation immigrants, these children faced a “dual personality” (Moya 1998), but ties to the Argentine nation were progressive and beneficial, as compared to ethnic ties to a homeland which they might never see. In order to make these ideological influences palatable to second-generation immigrant children, the conservative Argentine elites advocated a national culture by manipulating symbolism within their educational policies. This use of symbolism within the public school curriculum assuaged the ultimate goal of conservative elites: to create a new generation of Argentine *citizens* who were not merely the children of *immigrants*.

As this section has outlined, the educational system in Argentina was mostly aimed at those radical “undesirables” in society, indirectly referring to the large

number of radical southern Italians who immigrated to Buenos Aires specifically and to Argentina generally. However, due to intellectual discourse promulgating “racial heterogeneity” within the schools, specific racism against Italians is not prevalent within the public school curriculum. For this reason, I will explain how the symbols of nationalism advocated within the schools were aimed at all “undesirable” immigrants within the porteno culture,<sup>5</sup> and when appropriate, to Italians specifically.

The following sections will focus on this use of religious and linguistic symbolism within the schools, both in the pedagogical writings of the time and in the curriculum itself. The first section will cover such symbolism used to unfold a new *civil* religion, since the leading intellectuals’ positivistic rhetoric merited a strictly secular education. Yet, though I have referenced this intellectual ideal of an Argentine education without imposed religion, public schools were not entirely free from an “official theology”; the road to progress could not ignore the moral instruction of second-generation immigrants.

### **Civil Religious Symbolism: A “Modern” Version of an “Ancient” Control**

In the name of social science, what is seemingly an “official theology” can be deemed both secular and progressive with the use of particular rhetorical devices. Science has achieved this ideological power in Western society because of its relation to the paradigm of progress. In accordance with the long-held assumption that science implies democracy, positivistic Argentine elites viewed their “modern,” “scientific,” and “progressive” approach to education as upholding the values of a “free [democratic] society,” while denouncing religious instruction as an “ancient” institution that set the masses under strict control of a monarchical state.<sup>6</sup> However, despite these claims of secularism within the educational arena (not to mention official “proofs” such as the law of civil matrimony and of secular education), the Argentine “scientific” approach to public education heralded by elites and constructed by conservative intellectuals was as controlling an institution as religion.

Educational “science” in the name of progress was a mere cover for the civil religious qualities of both pedagogical rhetoric and educational method. In this section I will argue that, despite adamant claims of secularism by the Argentine elites, both science and religion are more similar than different in the Argentine public educational context, especially in the use of related symbolic manifestations. In order to construct a new Argentine identity, elites not only needed to overlay old ethnic identities that second-generation immigrant children acquired in their families, but to establish a new Argentine national identity shaped by institutionalizing patriotic symbols such as the constitution and sublimating traditions such as the legendary gaucho figure.

According to Comte, evolution should guide man through a “scientific progress towards positivism” (Baily 1971:4). The philosopher covered three stages of this process in his “ley de los tres estados” [law of three stages]: the first stage was



religious, the second, metaphysical, and the third, positivist. Intellectuals in Argentina such as Carlos Bunge applied Comte's theories to the new "scientific education," especially in the formation of a child's intelligence:

En la inteligencia del niño, mientras se desarrolla y robustece, reproducense también esas sucesivas modalidades de la historia. El espíritu del hombre civilizado es religioso hasta la pubertad. Solo cuando llega a su completo desarrollo se hace, aunque no siempre, verdaderamente positivo en sus tendencias e inclinaciones. [Baily 1971:10]

[The developing intelligence of the child is comparable to the model of human history. The spirit of the civilized man is religious at puberty. It is only when he is fully developed that he may have truly positive tendencies and inclinations, though this stage is not always reached. (my translation)]

According to the leading pedagogues, it was the responsibility of primary education to cover the first stage: "religious instruction." However, since a national religion "did not exist," these intellectuals went so far as to claim that primary education should embrace fictional traditions and legends to not only teach patriotism but to guide the child towards his final positivistic state (Baily 1971:14). Yet another way of describing this evolutionary educational process was the metaphor of concentric circles, where the first circle embodied the instruction of nationalism. These Argentine philosophies mirror that of John Dewey, a pedagogue highly influential in forming a similar U.S. educational policy in the late 19th century. As a strict "scientist" Dewey writes of religions as scientifically-proven to be false, but views "religious experience" as having some validity, relating religions to the shared-experiences of cultures (Fott 1998). This "religious experience" was, according to Dewey, valuable to the state for both the prevention of immoral acts and the promotion of moral progress for the "common good."

The new science of pedagogy justified the Argentine civil religious education and the "culto de la patria" [worship of the homeland] was this new religion; those who sanctified it wanted to convert immigrant children as soon as they began their formal education (usually at 6 years of age; primary education was usually taught to children from 6-14 years of age). After children had attended primary schools, some continued their "progression towards positivism" in the secondary schools and some in the normal schools, which propagated another generation of preacher teachers. But what of the many who chose to leave school right after the mandatory years of primary education were completed? If one views this situation through Comte's notions, these citizens remained in the first stage towards "progressive positivism." They were, in theory, "religiously" bound to Argentine soil.

The importance of instilling a strong sense of the “patria” is clear in Argentine pedagogical writings of this period; its application within public schools provides an easy antidote for the “social question.” According to Bunge, the only cure for the many forces against “the patria” is an education that provides this connection between the citizen and the nation. This pedagogue strongly valued claims of his fellow social scientists, that “the patria is essential for a citizen’s psychology” (Fott 1998:117). As another type of “modern” religion, the “scientific approach” to “religious” patriotism within schools—exalting the “scientific value of educational method” (Alcorta 1916:11) or treasuring the new science of pedagogy, for example—reassured all that theirs was a modern, “secular,” and “free” education.

The new Argentine civil religion called on all citizens to genuflect to the State instead of a divine figure, and though it seemed to contradict the values of freedom, all subjection would be rectified in the name of progress. The new “civil” God was the State (the political and intellectual oligarchy), and as the State was in control of both the ideological influences on educational policy and the actual curriculum, it posed itself as another “Father” for second-generation immigrant children. In fact, the state possessed as much claim to second-generation minds as did their own immigrant fathers. The rationale was that since the real father may have come from a background with values contrary to the state’s interest, he could only possess ideological control over the child’s home life. Outside of the home, the “State Father” would control the ideological path of the child’s educational process (Alcorta 1916:27-28).

This paternal approach that the state adopted over Argentine public education further assisted the process of converting children’s old identities to embrace the new national identity/culture. The academic’s claim that educational power enables one to be a “coartifice de Dios” [co-creator of God] promulgates the public educational system to a divine status.

Instead of the “dangerous” possibility of children developing on their own, it was the State’s duty in formulating a “nueva raza” and in protecting the society’s “health” to educate teachers to be “new protectors” after the child left his home (Alcorta 1916:13, 17-18). And, with the growing number of state-run “normal schools” or schools that educate future teachers, these educators could be relied on to instruct each subject in such a fashion as to inculcate certain ideological viewpoints held by conservative elites of the time.

The most “civil religious” subject within the curriculum was undoubtedly “la Moral Civica” [Civil Morals]. Moral education was far from a “secularized” education, and for this reason the rhetorical claim made by conservatives was highly criticized. As one early critic states, it is impossible to separate moral education from religion; he further adds that the absolute riddance of religion within Argentine public schools is impossible (Sans and Lajouane 1896). R. Monner Sans notes that since the mass population in Argentina is mostly Catholic, the teachers must also be mostly Catholic. Thus Sans claims that there must be an inevitable religious influence in the

public education system (1896:75). This critique highlights the state of Argentine educational policy during the period: the Catholic masses in Argentina were not represented by the few positivist elites in control who denounced their religion as “superstitious.” The situation was far from the merits of democracy which these leaders claimed to value so highly.

According to contemporary pedagogical writings, a teacher’s primary mission as a moral educator was to instill in his/her “disciples” (Bunge 1927:49) respect for social authorities. In addition to the obvious Christ-like connection of this relationship between the teacher and his or her “disciples,” another near-Biblical tool for educators was to use traditional legends to indoctrinate moral values in a parablesque fashion. These national stories were exalted as if religious doctrine; most moralized the values of patriotic teaching. One example was manipulation of the traditional legend of Atlantis to promote ideals surrounding the notion of “America” as a place for modernity and opportunity. According to this version of the legend, the “nueva Atlantida” *does* exist and is much like the legendary island in its magnificent geographical setting and the “justice of its laws and institutions.” In the Argentine version of the myth, this utopic “new Atlantis” can be found in America.

Though the historical figure of the Spanish gaucho was dubbed “barbarous” by the positivistic paradigm, legendary protagonists from the culture, such as Martin Fierro, were valued as patriotic “heroes of barbarous times” (Bunge 1927:205) by the emerging conservative elite. Despite the gauchian dialect that “corrupted” the national Castilian language and the “poetic flaws” which restricted themes of the ballads to either love or war, the figure of the gaucho provided a colorful and symbolic image, promoting patriotism in its most simplistic form. The standard rhythm of gaucho poems could be easily memorized, and children who repeated these verses could easily take the moral and patriotic messages home with them (Bunge 1927).

A final example of popularized folklore taught within the primary public schools is the tradition of Lucia Miranda, a fictional work by Ruy Diaz de Guzman that describes the discovery and conquest of the Rio de la Plata region. Despite the historical inaccuracies, Carlos Bunge (1927) praises this work, claiming the false history as a mere “inconvenience” and claiming his own history book to be an “accurate” addition to historical instruction.

As we have seen, from an ideological standpoint, the most convincing reason pedagogy gave to explain the need to glorify historically inaccurate legends such as that of Lucia Miranda, or the moralizing parables of Atlantis or Martin Fierro, was found in a Comtian description of the stages of a child’s development.

Enmeshed in the rhetorical webs of a “scientific” approach to education, the hypocrisy of elites who spoke of secular education but who actually incorporated a kind of patriotic and civic “religion” in the schools was not easily uncovered. The next section reveals another hypocritical approach to Argentine public education:

enforcing a national idiom that differed from the developing language within the new porteno culture, in a similar attempt to advance the cause of patriotism and progress. Like the use of civil religious symbols in both the actual curriculum and the rhetoric describing “secular” Argentine educational policies, the symbolic appeal of Castilian (Castellano) as an established tradition was key in pedagogical discourse; intellectual elites not only tried to preserve Castilian as the national language but saw its instruction as the only “remedy” for the widespread dialectical use of other hybrid languages forming at the time, such as Lunfardo and Cocoliche.

### **The Symbolic over the Practical: Enforcing the National Language in Schools**

Like religion, language can be used as a symbol by those in power to establish a collective identity. Leaders use language as a “symbolic marker” (Schneider 2000), important especially if the language is not used by the majority of the population. An interesting contemporary example is given by Arnd Schneider (2000), who, in his ethnographic research, found the Italian language manipulated symbolically by members of the CO.EM.IT (Comitato dell’Emigrazione Italiana) in meetings held in Buenos Aires (1988-1989). One premise of his work is the “inversion of [economic] roles” between Italy and Argentina during the last century—that is, his claim that as the economic growth in Argentina declined during the 20th century, the growth in Italy increased, especially during the latter half of the 20th century. In the late 1980s when Schneider conducted his research, Italo-Argentines benefited economically by drawing on their Italian identities. Yet, the practicality of using Italian in the CO.EM.IT meetings was questionable since the majority of the council members struggled with standard Italian, accustomed to either Italian dialects or the standardized Argentine Spanish.

In accordance with his theme of the “inversion of roles” between the two countries and ethnicities, Schneider notes that this contemporary “Italian revival” trend in Argentina—an attempt to re-gain ethnic ties through language—“had its counterpart in a long tradition of the Argentine state [which used] Spanish as one means of unifying the heterogeneous immigrant population” (Schneider 2000:279). It is not surprising that, in the early 20th century, the “traditional” language in Argentina was not that spoken by natives, since this population was virtually wiped out by the Spanish upon their conquest of the land. These conquistadores spoke in Castilian (Castellano), a version of Spanish from a particular region in Spain—and it was this idiom that elites (descendants of the Spanish conquistadores) proposed as the national language, despite its linguistic impracticality within the contemporary heterogeneous population. Like the incongruous use of civil “religious” symbols in “secular” schools, the instruction of Castilian was proposed as a national symbol of Argentine identity that could coercively “argentinizar” second-generation students, yet the spoken languages within this society differed from this traditionally literary language.

The national idiom was not a practical but a symbolic step towards national "progress." While some areas of educational policy reflected the elites' positivism, such as opting for classes in science, industrial training, and "living" languages (French and English) over "dead" languages (Latin and Greek), the compulsory classes in Castilian contradicted leaders' practical and progressive claim for education. One contemporary critique voiced a well-represented concern made by less conservative intellectuals: as Castilian was not useful to children entering the schools, these students became "victims of [the] nationalism of children" (Menendez 1928). This same document argues that, contrary to that of Castilian, the instruction of Italian in schools (restored in the *colegios nacionales* in the controversial law of 1918) was valuable, due to the "importanza numerica" of young Italians from immigrant families (Montgomery 1920).

The nationalist culture advocated preserving the "health" of Castilian in the Pampas. Created by conservative Argentine elites, its roots were dug deep in the "science" of social Darwinism, providing fertile ground for ideological intolerance. Trusted conservative intellectuals used the "survival of the fittest" metaphor to explain yet another social phenomenon: language. According to these social scientists, only the "superior" race could determine the language used by the national populace, where the "most phonetically and ideologically organized idiom" won the race (Menendez and Irigoyen 1937:28). Languages were like organisms, also entangled in the everyday struggle for progress (Carriegos 1928:17). Not only were "dialects" ignored by the "superior race" but also emerging literary trends, such as the "proceso degenerativo" [degenerative process] (Menendez and Irigoyen 1937:29) of certain modernist poetry, were handicapped more by the coercive and overt control of elites than by their innate "inferior" attributes.

As I have emphasized, xenophobia masked by this social Darwinist rhetoric and extreme nationalist sentiment determined many of the educational policies incorporated within public schools. The cultural roots of Castilian, and new lexicographic influences from "lo que viene da arriba" (Menendez 1928:20) or "high culture" (such as those derived from French) were those deemed essential for the "bewildered herd" (Chomsky 2000) of culturally "inferior" immigrant children entering the schools. Yet both peer groups and popular publications linguistically influenced adolescents of all social "levels" attending public schools. This fact concerned elite leaders greatly, as they agreed with Dr. E. S. Zeballos's Sarmientian critique of the "vicios de la lengua del dialecto extranjero" [vices of the language of foreign dialects] (Zeballos 1908:16).

Conservative fear was most exacerbated by an inevitable linguistic influence of these "undesirable" cultures. As a result of both popular publications (newspapers, magazines, comics, etc.) subject to "criticas lexicas" [lexical critiques] by pedantics applying their conception of "culteranismo" [cultured society] (Menendez 1928:16-17), and of children from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds

interacting both in and out of the classroom, one could hear these “undesirable” influences in the speech of all children attending schools.

Yet, not all changes in the traditional Castilian idiom were deemed noxious for the “health of the idiom.” Jesus Menendez, a contemporary sociologist, later writes that certain neologisms created and/or determined by “authority” figures in Argentine society are not only evolutionarily essential but are idiomatic alterations that reflect the progress of Argentine society. One example he uses is the “irregularities” found in Domingo F. Sarmiento’s speeches. According to this sociologist, the former president was not a “rebel of grammar” and his diversions from the standard idiom were justifiably “colored with particularisms of his thinking” (Menendez 1928:85).

In addition to idiomatic changes posed by national icons such as Sarmiento, elites’ strong faith in the new “science” of pedagogy gave conservative intellectuals the power to determine which neologisms should be incorporated into the national idiom and to decide how Castilian was to be instructed in the public school curriculum. Referred to as the “señores del academia real de la Lengua,” [gentlemen of the language academy] these philologists and lexicographers worked within the University of Buenos Aires to establish a new “Diccionario de la Lengua.” But this “reference book” ignored the many spoken languages evolving at the time, recognizing only one idiom as valid within Argentine society: Castellano (the above capital “l” in “Lengua” refers to the national idiom’s dominant position over any other “dialect” (Menendez 1928:7)).

Decisions made by the “academia de la Lengua” reflected their bias towards the French and Anglo culture, specifically over the “undesirable” Italian culture. The Argentine elite believed in a “necesidad del Frances e Inglese” [necessity of French and English] (Menendez 1928:9), not only for their love of these scientifically and literary “advanced” cultures, but also for their linguistic positions as “superior.” New words (mostly of French or Spanish origin, since these Latinate languages could influence Castiliano more than the Anglo-derivations of English) reflected progress in literature, philosophy, the sciences, the arts, and both industrial and commercial industry (Menendez and Irigoyen 1937:69). In addition, both English and French were recognized and respected as universal idioms, the latter of particular interest to Argentine pedagogues. French was, in fact, the foreign language taught most intensively in schools because of its cultural and ideological preference by the Academia (de la Lengua).

Traditional Castellano was modified by linguistic and lexicographical influences of either French or Italian origin; the former was regarded positively, the latter, negatively. One instance where this favoritism is apparent is, accordingly, in the terminology describing each ethnic-based neologism, concocted by these same reigning intellectuals and pointed out by contemporary critics such as Almanzor Medina. While Italian neologisms are regarded as “Italianisms,” those of the French language are termed “Galicisms.” Medina and others not only questioned the type of

language used, but argued that the ancient name for France, "Galia," is preferred over the modern because of academia's fondness for the French culture.

Critiques voiced by Medina and other more liberal intellectuals were most concerned with the practicality of favoring French lexicography over Italian linguistic influences. As I have indicated, Castilian itself was valued not for its practical use, but for its symbolic relation to a "pure" national identity; thus, though this literary language had no vernacular usage in contemporary Argentine society, its lexicographic value as a national symbol within national texts was more important than its linguistic value in everyday life. French was regarded similarly, since this "language of diplomacy" was rarely used in conversation in Argentine society (Menendez and Irigoyen 1937:69).

Since the new "habla" (Gobello 1994) developing in Argentina during this time period was a direct result of the influx of mass Italian immigration, Italo-Argentine hybrid languages formed such as Lunfardo and Cocoliche.<sup>7</sup> The former was predominant among both Italian and creole populations. Conservative leaders felt that these new "hablas" "corrupted" the literary tradition of the "idioma de la patria madre" (Menendez and Irigoyen 1937:20) or Castilian, which, as I have indicated, was an indispensable symbol of Argentine identity and of "sano nacionalismo" [healthy nationalism] (Menendez and Irigoyen 1937:12). However, according to critics, Lunfardo was only an "invented system for [all] those who [were not] from 'La Lengua'" (Menendez 1928:23).

But the negative characteristics of Lunfardo were innate, since its very name was first coined by policemen and criminologists. The term "Lunfardo" was initially used in reference to "ladros" [robbers] in a famous 1895 article by Benigno Lugones in *La Nacion* (Gobello 1994:23-24), which listed fifty-three Lunfardian words, all associated with crime and prison. These same words are found instead in reference to "porteno" culture in an article printed eight years earlier in *La Nacion* (Gobello 1994:23-24). The anachronism reveals the apparent "adversary effects" of an increasing number of Italian immigrants in Argentina. Replacing the relatively-neutral "porteno" with the negatively-associated "Lunfardo" reflects the change in ideological viewpoints voiced in Argentine mass publications such as this widespread newspaper.

One rationale that conservative intellectuals claimed to deem the language of Lunfardo as a "plebeyocracia idiomática" [idiomatic plebianism] (Menendez 1928:68) was the threat of an increasing number of "Italianisms," which, according to elites, demonstrated the "low culture" of those who spoke in this vernacular. These elites adamantly believed Sarmiento's claim that an idiom reflects the expression of the ideas of a people (Carriegos 1928:18); thus, any linguistic influence from an "undesirable" group, such as southern Italian dialect, was cause for alarm. A fairly innocuous example is the conversion of the word "polenta" (a dish with Genovese roots) to "pulenta," which those from "la Lengua" saw as a threatening attempt to "popularize" the Italian cuisine (Contribucion al Estudio del Italianismo en la

Republica Argentina 1925:198). A more vivid example is that of the “Italianism” “fiaca” which has several meanings, all relating to “doing nothing” or being a “loser.” Since a derivation of “fiaca” is not to be found in the Spanish language, members of the academia saw the word as another example that demonstrated this “lazy and underdeveloped” culture (Menendez and Irigoyen 1937:25).

According to “la Lengua” many of these “Italianisms” originated from political causes or local problems within the Italian immigrant culture. But these “facts” given by trusted (social) “scientists” were criticized by many contemporary linguists as faulty. For example, R. Monner Sans reviewed the fifty-nine “Italianisms” given by the academy of which he found thirty-two to be incorrect, twenty-one as ambivalent, and only six as correct. He further noted that of the incorrect, ten were not “Italianisms” at all and six were admitted “Italianisms” but not even used in the Plata region (*Contribucion al Estudio del Italianismo en la Republica Argentina* 1925:44).

Despite these criticisms, the practicality of Lunfardo as a spoken language compared to the scant utility of Castilian as a written language has been elucidated by many scholars, both past and present. While some more liberal intellectuals of the time used the same social Darwinist discourse as their conservative colleagues, where a language or idiom was compared to a “ser vivo” [living being], they felt strongly that the populace creates the new vocabulary which becomes the national idiom, not the lexicographer or literary scholar. They further regarded the Castilian idiom as a “ser muerto” [dead being] and the Genovese dialect as a “ser vivo”—even describing the latter as “arte linguistico” [linguistic art] (Menendez 1928:16).

The instruction of Castilian as the “national idiom” mirrors Schneider’s example in the beginning of this section: Italian was used not for practical purposes, but as a symbol to maintain or establish a collective identity. There is, however, an important difference between the two: while one symbol is voluntarily used to re-gain a lost ethnic identity, the other is enforced among a populace in order to establish a homogenous national identity.

As this paper has attempted to illustrate, a state-enforced identity or national culture, such as that enforced by policy makers and pedagogues within the Argentine public educational system, was difficult for immigrant children to sidestep. While second-generation children searched for re-made identities within a new native-land, within their schools a ready-made identity was presented to them on a symbolic platter.

### **State-Run Cultural Hegemony in Public Schools: A Comparative Look**

While undertaking research for this paper, I noted that at least one section of every contemporary work about Italian immigrants in Argentina was devoted to clarifying both the arbitrary nature of the term “ethnic” when referring to this Italo-



Argentine population, and the almost infinite number of new identities formulated within the new socio-cultural context of Buenos Aires or other areas in Argentina. With the number and variety of Italian and non-Italian societies in Argentine cities established as early as the mid-19th century (many functioning up to the present), Italian immigrants and those from other countries were provided with many shades to color their individual identifying portraits. The state's attempt to whitewash these individual representations of identity within the public schools was a result of conservative fear and ideological dogma; national leaders relied on the artistic talent of social scientists to undertake the rhetorical task of re-painting an enduring masterpiece: a new national culture.

Despite the contradiction between individual and national identities, the National Council of Education in Argentina advocated an homogenized version of the latter, in an attempt to clear the ideological slates of immigrant-children's minds. What was put in place of the sometimes-"dangerous" ideologies acquired at home, were symbolic representations of ephemeral constructs—a new civil religion that posed Argentine history as a "simple minded morality play" (Chomsky 2000) and idealized national myths as indispensable, and an antiquated literary idiom which was only spoken by those enforcing the language itself. Whether these two symbolic manifestations within the schools were successful in creating an homogenous national identity depended on the rhetorical authority of pedagogical discourse and contemporary "scientific" (philosophical) theory (i.e. Comte). A more in-depth study than this one could theorize whether their rhetoric was successful by looking at the spectrum of socio-political and/or nationalist tendencies within the second and even third-generation immigrant societies.

While I have outlined two symbolic manipulations within Argentine schools in the latter two sections of this thesis, I have only skimmed the surface of the pedagogical rhetoric and the symbolic curriculum which such discourse legislated--both of which coercively propagated elite ideals of a single national culture. However, as one of the most valuable aspects of socio-cultural anthropology, by broaching this topic on a micro-scale, similar controlling processes may be revealed on a macro/global scale.<sup>8</sup> For instance, as I referred to in the introduction, in many respects, a similar national culture is symbolically imposed within the U.S. public educational arena.

Due to the plethora of debates surrounding California Propositions 187 and 227<sup>9</sup>, the issue of national language instruction within the U.S. is too complicated to address here; but the situation is related, in part, to issues of an imposed national idiom discussed in this thesis. A somewhat more accessible topic is that of a U.S. civil religion similar to that instructed in Argentine public schools. Recently, I discussed the instruction of history in my own public high school in Modesto, California with a friend who graduated in the same class and attended similar "advanced placement" courses as I. Though we did not notice at the time, our high school history department is and was comprised of only two histories: U.S. history

and European history. For my friend and I, the former was instructed exponentially better than the latter. Besides ignoring the entire scope of non-European histories (a loaded issue in itself), our advanced U.S. history class was taught by an older and more experienced teacher who was even “famous” in our high school for his good-natured temperament. Our advanced placement European history class, however, was instructed by a teacher who came straight from school herself and could not control the class. While my example may be arbitrary, it is probably common in many U.S. public high schools (that is, the tendency to forefront U.S. history over all other histories), and it is especially telling since the courses we attended were the most advanced offered at our high school.

Prioritizing national history in the curriculum is one thing, but changing history itself to formulate a national mass culture that brings light to selective knowledge (as is the case of the “official theology” instructed in Argentine public schools) is another. Fortunately, this state of affairs was not, to my knowledge, prevalent in my high school; however, U.S. public education is not free from a controlled civil religion that filters knowledge to adjust to our childrens’ mass consumption. The fear of “weakened faith of the masses” was more overt in American pedagogical commentary and its influence in legislating a particular public school curriculum in the early 20th century—one author cites a New York public school doctrine from the 1920s which strove to maintain the patriotic faith in children’s minds by keeping them isolated from the truth (Hayes 1926). As in Argentina during the same period, a rampant fear of losing ideological control over the “bewildered herd” (Chomsky 2000:23) of public school children drove political leaders to rely on social science to re-make history for specific purposes.

What is even more surprising (but perhaps not altogether unexpected given the amount of enlightening and sometimes incriminating information always embedded in the “backpage” of U.S. newspapers) is the present-day claims of control over knowledge deemed contrary to the cherished national identity/culture within our public schools. In a recent article printed in *The San Francisco Chronicle* (Schevitz 2002), the current paranoia infecting the White House, the fear of terrorism, incited President Bush to call for strict control over “yet-undefined academic areas off limits to ‘certain international students’” within American universities. As if one turned the clock back an entire century to the period discussed in this paper, the official proposal uncovers the same controlling process: an attempt by those in power to mold the minds of “outsiders” to conform to an ideal national culture. And, as in Argentina when the masses were persuaded by rhetoric glorifying progress and industrialization, in the U.S. discourse thrives on a collective anti-terrorist sentiment—so strong that President Bush has the audacity to propose a policy that would “keep some foreign students from studying ‘sensitive’ academic subjects” (Schevitz 2002).

The goal of this study has been to open up discussion of such restricting policies, and to unveil the deeper ideological workings and causes for such control. My specific focus has been on how the particular social and political authority over an

immigrant-comprised country governed the direction of the national educational policy in Argentina. During the time period covered, the influx of many “undesirable” immigrants called on a specific xenophobic “social question” (comparable to our own national and global anti-terrorist “social question”), subjecting the mass population (many who were the targeted individuals themselves) to covert ideological control through symbolism perpetuated in the nationalized schools. It is my hope that historical cases such as the one covered in this study may make modern citizens of nation-states more aware of the controls within their own national schools; for as one contemporary sociologist warns, children in Argentina then and in the U.S. now are in danger of losing their own identities to the hegemonic identity of the state:

The fact remains, however, that in the present age in every national state, there are large numbers of persons who, because they have learned to read but not to think, are potential dupes of any propaganda in the name of patriotism and nationalism. [Hayes 1926:243]

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<sup>1</sup>Forty-five percent of all immigrants to Buenos Aires were of Italian origin between 1861-1915, and Italians made up at least 25% of the population of Buenos Aires by 1887 (Baily 1999). Immigrants from anywhere in Europe (including Italians) comprised 70-80% of Argentine society during this period (Schneider 2000:28).

<sup>2</sup>Since Italy was unified only in 1861, regional ties still reigned over Italian national ties for many southern Italian immigrants. Furthermore, national policies which included redistribution of land in rural areas drove many out of their villages in search of economic opportunities in America (Baily 1999:72).

<sup>3</sup>In addition, the national government in Argentina gained control over all primary education and most secondary education in 1904.

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<sup>4</sup> This dogmatic buzz-phrase not only resembles others within the Argentine pedagogical rhetoric of the period, but also certain trends within our own society. One poignant example is worth referencing, uncovered by Benjamin DeMott (1996) in an article entitled "Seduced by Civility." While the piece mostly covers our society's manipulation of the words "civil" and "uncivil," here he cites another example from U.S. history: "Randall Kennedy emphasized that nineteenth-century civility promoters had indicted abolitionists for incivility: 'The people who marched under the banner of civility, the people who were the compromisers, the people who were being afraid of being labeled as radicals and extremists, were the people who were willing to allow slavery to continue'" (DeMott 1996:4).

<sup>5</sup> Schneider defines this "porteno culture" as having "many ethnic origins" (2000:146).

<sup>6</sup> This dichotomous ideology is not particularly Argentine; however certain Argentine political and intellectual figures embraced its ideological constructs, specifically relating the positivistic idealism to the state of America and Argentina. One such historical figure is President Sarmiento. Another is Ricardo Rojas, who writes of progress as the contrast between modern and ancient society, Catholicism and free religion, and monarchy and democracy in his 1922 work *Eurindia* (as cited in Baily 1971:116).

<sup>7</sup> Coçoliche has been defined as a hybrid "habla" of the immigrant who tried to copy native speaking, and lunfardo as native speaking that attempts to copy that of the immigrants. The latter was more widespread and more revealing of the large number of Italians who immigrated. Contrary to many contemporaries, this recent author shows that lunfardo was not a "cultist" language, since in reality a majority of the Argentine community spoke in this "dialect" (Gobello 1994:21).

<sup>8</sup> "Controlling processes" is a term created and used by Laura Nader (1997), which she defines as: "the transformative nature of central ideas such as coercive harmony that emanate from institutions operating as dynamic components of power."

<sup>9</sup> Essentially, proposition 187 prohibits social aid to non-US citizens and proposition 227 eliminates bi-lingual education from California public schools.