

Argentina experience in the field of international migration since 1945:  
coherent or contradictory?

## Introduction

Argentina's historiography can be traced as an analogy to immigration. Indeed, immigration was a crucial instrument in the nation-building process which followed the genocide of natives by Spanish colonizers. From then on, the country was built upon one of its inventors' maxims: "to govern is to populate" (Alberdi, 1820: 3). What he meant, in fact, was to replace indigenous people with Europeans. Needless to say, approximately only 1 per cent of the population can be considered indigenous of the country; the rest are almost entirely of European origin and a small portion is made up by *meztizos*, a mixture of indigenous and early European settlers.

The influx of Europeans has been the most prevalent throughout Argentina's history, but the 'white' character of that pattern had started to change before the Second World War by informal migration from neighbouring countries. The post-war period brought what most authors (see Germani, 1974; Lattes, 1990) consider the last massive movement. After this period, the 'invisible' people started becoming more noticeable. In real terms, today the major migrant intake is composed indigenous people and *meztizos* of other South American countries.

The aim of this paper is to examine migration to Argentina since 1945, and to discuss the contradictions in the Argentine approach to

migratory issues. The Argentine approach to immigration since 1945 has been consistently incoherent. This is evident in four main spheres: a) Argentine national identity, b) recruitment of European labour during the post-war period, c) neglect of migrants from neighbouring countries in relation to those of European origin during the post-war period and d) the contradiction of the whole approach to migratory issues after the slowing of the intakes of Europeans in the 1960s: legislation, census and the media.

In order to understand how the above shaped the experience of Argentina in the field of immigration and migrant settlement, this paper first will briefly examine the Argentinean national identity, governed as it is by an ambivalent feeling of Europhobia-Europhilia; second it will focus on the two main periods (1945- late 1950s - 1960 up to the present) emphasising the contradiction in the formal recruitment of the period and on the dualistic approach to people from Europe and people from Latin America. Finally, this paper will focus on the official approach in relation to legislation and policies other than the specific recruitment, and on the consequences of this.

### **National identity**

Argentines define themselves in relation to two different groups. To Latin Americans, Argentineans are European, based on the demographic composition of its population. In reference to Europeans, however, Argentineans define themselves as 'Argentineans', based on a nativism which emerged at the end of last century and at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Argentine identity also includes the *criolla* culture inherited from the 19th century. According to Cara-Walker, Europeanization failed since the new *criollismo* embraced native and foreign characteristics (1987: 62). The author sees the inclusion of natives feature as a failure of the imposed model of European tradition. It incorporated the legacy of the two massive migratory movements, highly discriminated against at the beginning and then incorporated as one of the most important characteristics.

One of the most notorious outcomes of that mixture was personalized in a kind of makeshift *gaucho* named *Cocoliche*, famous at the beginning of this century. Although the character does no longer exist, the term "...is still used generically there to indicate any hybrid language, a language mixture, or broken speech" (Cara-Walker, 1987: 53). What she does not discuss here is the fact that this is probably one of the most important features of the 'Argentinism' and it is used in a very pejorative sense. When the requirement is to accept indigenous behaviour, Argentines are European, when it is necessary to accept European, racist humorism abounds<sup>1</sup>.

By contrast, Australia's self-image has never included a feature of any mixture of indigenous people with people of British origin. Castles et al. argue that Australian national identity has been racist, sexist and misleading since it attempted to base its ethnicity on Anglo tradition,

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<sup>1</sup> There are many TV programs which ridicule Europeans, natives from other Latin American countries are just absent in all programs except the news which portrayed them as inferiors and trouble-makers. One of the best-seller in 1993 was called 'chistes de gallegos' (jokes about Spanish from Galicia) which portrayed the group as though and ignorant. The book was so popular that in 1994 another book, not a second edition but a second volume –chistes de gallegos 2– was a success.

ignoring the division within the same British state. This image of reflection of 'man' originated in the British Isles was unsustainable after the massive post-war migration (Castles et al., 1992: 9). However, Morrissey argues that Italian migrants in Australia, one of the most numerous groups after the majoritarian Anglo-Celtic, have relatively little influence on the mainstream culture (1992: 204).

In relation to this, perhaps one of the most comprehensive publication comparing Argentina-Australia migration issues available in Australia is a 1991 publication by Morrissey on Italian migration to both countries. The comparison refers to Italians not specifically in the second post-war period, however most of the generalizations are applicable to all. Taking up Argentinean authors, Morrissey points out that "the central dynamic of mass migration to Argentina led to the development of a unique Argentine culture which is different from that prevailing in the mid-19th century..." (1992: 203). Morrissey properly argues that assimilationism in Argentina was characterized by "...the intellectual/mythological underpinning of the new Argentine nationalism...". A product of the elites which needed to create a "distinctive national identity" (1992: 212-3). In relation to Australia, Morrissey considers that perhaps globalisation and the large scale non-British migration to Australia will lead to a cultural transformation more significant than the one he portrays in the case of Argentina (1992: 214).

Morrissey shows the lack of Italian identity of the second generation of Argentine-born children of Italian migrants as different from the Australian case (Morrissey, 1991: 204). However it is arguable that a different situation applies now; dual citizenship and double

identity is strongly encouraged by the government and well accepted among second and third generation immigrants of European origin. The reason for this is simple, most migrants are eligible for pension, this releases the Argentinean government of that obligation<sup>2</sup>, and provides the beneficiaries with more stable financial resources. The advantages of the Community passport is easy access to the European community which is of great importance for political and economic emigrants.

### **History of the two periods**

Morrissey argues that Argentina migration cannot follow the traditional "progression" which goes from assimilationism, integrationism and multiculturalism, which characterises mass migration period in Australia (Castles et al., 1988 cited in Morressey, 1992: 204). The Argentine's government approach towards immigration has not changed. The main change was from assisted recruitment to the almost non-existence of any kind of welfare either for old local or for new settlers.

Castles describes the two-class system of immigration - one is that of British and Northern Europeans, which were assisted and provided full labour- market and civil rights upon arrival, Eastern and Southern Europeans formed the other class. At the same time there was a third class, which consisted of those who were not admitted at all (1992: 3). This pattern characterized the Australian post-war migration until the

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<sup>2</sup> The Argentinean government posts special official in consulates throughout Europe, specially Italy with the purpose of facilitating the obtaintion of pension, citizenship and scholarship in Universities.

mid 1960s when Australia shifted away from overt discrimination (Castles et al, 1992: 51).

This categorization is comparable to the pattern Argentina has followed since 1945 up to the present. There are two main categories that can be identified in Argentina's post-war migration. One which is referred to by many authors as the 'third period' of migration, mainly of people of European origin who were highly assisted. The other group of migrants were 'anti-Constitutional' and undocumented<sup>1</sup>. Both were important for their major role in the nation building process and for their economic significance. The first represents the government's pride, the second the target of blame. There is a third group, which is hardly taken into consideration, it is the return migration of expatriates to Argentina, not large in numbers at all.

Migration to Argentina since 1945 can be broken into two main periods the first was the post-war migration from Europe, the second period was important before but has become more visible since it grew in proportion to the total intake. The later is made up by Latin Americans, Koreans and African refugees, however the number of Koreans and Africans is not great.

The former group, that of a large European component, was the product of two of president Peron's 'Quinquennial plans'. The plans consisted of a modernization process which required industrial labour. Intending to solve labour shortages the absorption of foreign labour was

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<sup>1</sup> The polarized treatment of these groups will be discussed later in this paper.

included in both plans (Barbero & Cacopardo, 1991: 293). However, both plans gave preference to people of rural origin who were willing to work in agriculture (Barbero & Cacopardo, 1991: 318). As Barbero and Cacopardo point out, this was extremely contradictory with the president's plans whose aim was industrial development (1991: 317). This tendency was reverted during the early 1960s when the emphasis was on skilled labour recruitment (Germani, 1974).

The criteria was to recruit people who were more easily assimilable into the receiving society, therefore ethnicity and religion were taken into account. The government set office in several European countries with the purpose of promoting migration to Argentina. While since 1945 there was a general recruitment, during the 1950s the assistance was focussed upon migrants of rural origin who were willing to work in agriculture. As a consequence of Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration requirements, assistance was also given to refugees of any European country.

The recruitment of people of rural origin when the labour shortages were in the industrial sector represents one contradiction. The other contradiction lies in the highly discriminatory recruitment program based on ethnicity, while at the same time migrants from neighbouring countries were employed informally in the same areas as Europeans. There was no official way of recruiting nor assisting workers in the informal labour market.

The political and economical instability during the middle 1950s in Argentina stemmed migration and although the economic situation

improved in the late 1950s and early 1960s the potential migrants to Argentina had found other destinations (Barbero and Cacopardo, 1991: 298). It was in these years that another big influx of migrants became noticeable, those of neighbouring countries.

The word illegal when referring to migrants is almost synonymous with people from other South American countries. However the regional process of integration is encouraging governments to rethink migratory rules.

Migration from neighbouring countries is not exclusive to the last decades, at the end of last century. For example Paraguayans were well known for their role in deforestation, Bolivians for harvesting crops in the northwest and Bolivians and Chileans in the South for sheep-sheering, horticulture, fruit and wine industry and later, oil extraction (Villar, 1984: 454-5). It was not until the third massive movement of European was exhausted, in the early 1960s, that it grew in importance. It has been always not well documented and there has never been a official policy of recruitment as in the case of European migration.

Villar considers that migratory flows from neighbouring countries "...constitutes critical movements in the frontier areas of Argentina, attracting considerable official attention." (1984: 455). What is not discussed is why they are 'illegals'. Migrants from neighbouring countries worked in the agriculture industry as did the Europeans, however the former did not have full rights upon arrival while the later did. Both groups were employed in the same kind of industry, for instance in the early 1950s the government promoted by subsidies,

through its European office, the formation of agriculture communities in North and Central of Argentina (Barbero and Cacopardo, 1991: 295) and in 1951 a decree was designed to regularize the situation of Paraguayans working in deforestation (Villar, 1984: 459) –for a posterior agriculture settlement– in the same region. Nevertheless, this should be understood as a part of a regional phenomenon, "... irregular or illegal migration is the predominant form of migration in Latin America, but this was not viewed as a problem until the late 1960s and early 1970s." (Castles and Miller, 1993: 148-9).

These groups settled first in the regions where they worked but later they joined the outmigration of Argentines to the main urban poles (Villar, 1984: 454). It was at this time that they became even more visible. Since then on government rhetoric has ranged from claiming itself non-xenophobe (Ver cómo se cita un diario *Migración Noticias*, 1994: 26) to Minister's for Internal Affairs' declaration: the immigration from neighbouring countries is a threat to the Argentinean model (EFE in *Migración Noticias* No 41, 1994: 37).

According to Muraro the current attitude towards migrants is the consequence of the economic crisis and not because most of them are from neighbouring countries. He argues the same happens with newly arrived migrants from Europe (Muraro in Kollmann, 1993: 17). It should be said here that there is misleading information from the government who blame foreign workers for unemployment when they, in fact, as Moldes points out represent less than 1% of the general unemployment rate (1993: 14).

## Government policies and legislation

Government intervention in both countries has been of great significance in drafting policies. While in the past the Argentinean government had played a major role, the latest governments have only produced feeble population policies, the consequence of this is: a)- an old population on the one hand and almost full employment among the migrant population, on the other b)- a shift from a classical country of immigration to a country of informal immigration and c)- a high level of racism against 'illegal' migrants.

In Australia, instead, the current policy of multiculturalism, despite its contradictions, is a "... central part in the successful model for immigrant settlement and community relations." (Castles, 1992: 13). The alternative to reach equality and real communality are "...based on the best elements of national Australian tradition, the most important postulates of multiculturalism, and the needs and interests of the broad majority of the population" (Castles et al, 1992: 147). Multiculturalism is the official Australian policy regarding migration, ethnic relations and social issues, it "has emerged as a formula for managing both social policy and identity" (Castles, 1992: 13). This means that the current Australian approach to migration can evolve within the same model as the most successful instrument to manage the diverse society product of immigration in the second part of this century. Crucial at issue is the important part played by the government and several institutions analysing the problem and accepting criticisms from within. Nothing comparable occurs in Argentina.

The contradiction in official approach to immigration started at the very beginning, the Argentinean Constitution begs in its preamble " for all the people who want to inhabit the Argentinean soil...", however there are two articles in it aimed at promoting European migration with especial references to the people who can be easily assimilated into the culture. The constitution still severely discriminate against people of non-European origin.

There is a lack of legislation and a inconsistent demographic policy aggravated by a very ineffective implementation of what is available. The current migration policy is governed by 1994 law which consists of two main parts, one refers to promotion of immigration and determines region of the country to be populated and the second part regulates the movement of foreigners. Throughout the history there have been a bulk of decrees, laws and reglamentation, obviously inapplicable because they were followed by and number of amnesty laws to regularise the situation of new 'illegals' (see Villar, 1984).

The most important gaps of the Argentinean census are first, it is not clear the inclusion of undocumented people, most of them are not. Interviewers collect the data house by house, most undocumented migrants lives in shanty-towns or in employers' house. In the first case, the household is not clearly determined, therefore very difficult to obtain clear results, in the second case the head of household may include them as a part of them or because they do not declare the employees they may omit them in the declaration for the census. The second problem with the census is that it only shows people born abroad, independently of the year of arrival and without discriminating much by country of origin.

This has resulted in After 1965 the population growth rate is almost not influenced by people born abroad. According to Moldes, the declines of fecundity, the stagnation of birth rate and the slowing of immigration transform the country into a land of elderly people. It is arguably that the slowing of immigration albeit real is not perhaps as strong as appears in the official statistics and in Moldes perception where the analysis of the informal migration is absent.

### **Conclusion**

There are numerous ways of comparing Australia and Argentina. They reasonably comparable in their history, however, since the middle of this century their their path has forked.

In terms of migration Argentina was no longer attractive to the workers it wanted to attract. Its general policies were guided by contradiction and this topic is one of its.

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