Honors Thesis Proposal

for

Positivism and Women in Fin-de-Siècle Argentina:
The Use of Patriarchy to Maintain Social Control, 1880-1930

Aubrey A. Kuperman

Yovanna Pineda, Ph.D
Thesis Committee Chair
Department of History

John Sacher, Ph.D
Department Chair
Department of History

Amelia Lyons, Ph.D
Committee Member from Major
Department of History

Kelly Astro, M.S. Ed.
Director of Research and Civic Engagement
The Burnett Honors College

Maria Santana, Ph.D.
Committee Member from outside Major
Department of Women’s Studies
Positivism in Fin-de-Siècle Argentina:
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Aubrey Kuperman
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My thesis examines how the leading elites in Buenos Aires sought to create a patriarchal and Positivist\textsuperscript{1} society in order to counter the moral degeneration they feared modernity and mass immigration created. Modernity\textsuperscript{2} meant a fundamental change in the economics of both family and nation, a shift in socially acceptable behavior for women and lower classes, and increasing scientific knowledge. Elites feared that these facets of modernity would disrupt the status quo and their high-ranking social positions. In my thesis, I argue that these fears drove elite leaders to distrust immigrants and to use Positivism as a means to control undesirable elements of society, in particular women. Elite's efforts impeded women's rights in a variety of ways including their rights as mothers, heads of household and workers.

My analyses of this topic are based on primary sources and secondary sources on the role of women, philanthropy, the influence of immigration, and French culture in Buenos Aires. Readings from a few of the leading Argentine Positivists has allowed for a better understanding of their concerns, while secondary literature on the various roles of women in society has shown how these fears played a role in the daily lives of women. Secondary literature on the nature of European immigration is also crucial in any discussion of Argentina at the turn of the century, as it was dominant force in society at the time.

European immigration and cultural influence helped shape Argentine society and culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Spanish, Italian, and French

\textsuperscript{1} I use Positivism here to refer to the system of patriarchy which developed around the writings of Auguste Comte in the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{2} Here I use modernity to describe the period of social change driven by large technological and scientific improvements and the resultant shift in industry and popular culture.
immigrants and culture were particularly fundamental. Between 1857 and 1930, 6,278,341 immigrants poured into Argentina. These immigrants transformed the culture of both the capital, Buenos Aires, and the pampas.

Government officials and leading elites in Buenos Aires hoped that the immigrants pouring into the city from Europe would help them create a better popular culture. The porteño elite aspired to emulate European culture, in particular they adopted French philosophies and attempted to transform Buenos Aires into a “Paris of South America”. Many elite families, particularly those influential in government, sent their sons to France to continue their studies in fields such as politics. At this time, Europe nations grappled the “social question”; European elites were unsure how to deal with the social instability wrought by industrialization and revolution. The public health physicians José María Ramos Mejía and Jose Ingenieros serve as examples of the influence of European philosophies and knowledge. These two doctors were influenced by Positivism and used Positivist science to solve what they saw as the “social problem” in Buenos Aires. Doctors, government officials, and the police were also heavily involved in the efforts. Often, these polarizing policies dealt in some way with women; prostitution and families without strong father figures were particularly threatening to the male policymakers in Buenos Aires. Prostitution was legal in Argentina between 1870 and the 1930s.

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4 For more on this topic, see Jose C. Moya, Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930 (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 1998);
5 Porteños are residents of the port city of Buenos Aires.
7 Hereafter, the effects of these phenomena, including demographic changes and general social unrest, will be referred to as fears of modernization.
The European community openly criticized this policy, forcing Argentine officials to continuously ‘improve’ the system. These improvements were primarily the concern of the public health physicians or higienistas, such as Ramos Mejía and Ingenieros, and they were rarely beneficial to the women themselves. The measures were designed to stop the spread of venereal disease and immorality in the city rather than to protect the women. As Donna Guy points out in *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*, the men in charge were not concerned with the factors which drove most women to prostitution, namely poverty. Gender roles in Buenos Aires, similarly to most of elite South America, were also undergoing changes as modernity took hold of society. Women, in their roles as mothers, were seen as providers and caretakers of a new generation of Argentines. In their roles as mothers, they were vital to new philosophies such as Social Darwinism, but they were also seen as creatures that were highly susceptible to moral corruption caused by modernity.

**The French Influence on Argentine Positivism**

The father of Positivist philosophy in France was Auguste Comte, who advocated the use of women as the cornerstone of the family which he believed ought to be the base of society. According to Mary Pickering, this was influenced by a number of factors including living through three different revolutions and a number of constitutions, a rocky relationship with his wife Caroline Massin, Saint-Simonian and feminist ideals of the 1840s,

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9 Like many young countries, Argentina was very interested in maintaining a positive image in the eyes of the world community, particularly Europe.

and the theory of ‘separate spheres’ for men and women. Ultimately, Comte’s vision of
women changed between the 1820s and 1860. In the 1850s, Comte began to advocate the
education of women, arguing that women’s deficiencies were due to nurture, not nature; he
argued that women’s education was important, in part, because they would need a better
education to serve in their role as mothers. Comte’s ideal can be seen in what Karen Mead
terms the “mujer argentina” who was characterized by “abnegation, self-sacrifice,
willingness to work hard, and sound economic management skills.”

French cultural influence in Buenos Aires was paramount in the construction of
Porteño society. Both Louis Furman Sas, “The Spirit of France in Argentina” and J.P.
Daughton, “When Argentina Was “French”; Rethinking Cultural Politics and European
Imperialism in Belle-Époque Buenos Aires” examine the unique influence of French culture
in Buenos Aires, the capital of a former Spanish colony. Sas’s article, written almost
contemporaneously, lauds the French as the reason for Buenos Aires’ high level of culture.
Sas points to a quote by Manual Ugarte, “Se puede decir que Francia realizó la conquista
de América con sus libros.” This quote sums up the idea that the French influence, or
conquest, in Argentina was purely cultural.

Daughton argues that the French pushed their culture upon the Argentines when
they realized that Great Britain, the United States, and Germany were all surpassing them
in terms of an economic impact upon Argentina. Daughton also discusses French confusion

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11 ‘Separate Spheres’ dictated that women would have control over the domestic sphere, while the men
controlled the public sphere.
12 Mary Pickering, “Angels and Demons in the Moral Vision of Auguste Comte,” *Journals of Women’s History*
8 (Summer, 1996): 10-40.
15 my translation: “It can be said that France conquered [South] American with their books.”
regarding the popularity of Italian culture; thus, it can be seen that the French did not clearly understand that a sizable portion of Argentine society was Italian.

Both Sas and Daughton contribute part of the influence of the French to the fact that many Argentine elites sent their sons to study in France. These men brought back French ideas, including Positivism, and implemented them in their professions. Porteños, or residents of Buenos Aires, had a long history of Europhilia, as can be seen in Alberdi’s writings when he claimed that the best way to advance the Nation was to bring in as many European immigrants as possible.

Ultimately, Daughton argues that the lines between official and unofficial imperialism were blurred when it came to the relationship between France and Argentina. While this seemed like a logical conclusion, he did not address the feelings of Porteños observing French influence in Buenos Aires or those who went to France, in enough detail to label the relationship one of “imperialism”. The term imperialism has a definition that is quite different for the imperialists and the nation being imposed upon. Unfortunately, neither of these articles discussed the feelings of the Porteños or their experiences in France in any detail. Both articles had clearly discernable biases in that both greatly admired French culture and did not address any possible disadvantages to the French influence in Argentine society.

**Primary Sources**

I examine sources written by leaders influential during the first phase of European immigration and in the Positivist movement in Argentina. These different perspectives are useful in understanding European influence in Argentina. What follows is a chronological analysis of the most relevant sources to my thesis.
In 1845, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s essay, “Physical Aspect of the Argentine Republic, and the Forms of Character, Habits, and Ideas Induced by It” examined the dichotomy of barbarism and civilization. Although not nominally a Positivist, Sarmiento was influenced by similar philosophical movements, particularly Social Darwinism. Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinism used Darwinian evolutionary theory to justify racism by propounding the theory of Survival of the Fittest. This theory legitimized racial inequality in the eyes of the new Positivist school. Sarmiento uses the theory that evolution is influenced by environment as the basis for his argument that the people of the interior were inferior to the porteño population. He argued that Rosas was the “climax of [provincial] barbarism”, a clear insult as he believed that residents of the provinces were less evolved than porteños.16

Similarly, in 1853, Juan Bautista Alberdi believed the native populations of the interior were barbaric and encouraged immigration as the sole means for advancement.17 He stated that “to govern is to populate” and the main goal of any government ought to be to populate the country.18 He believed that the best way to gain a larger population and to advance the country was to populate Argentina with European immigrants. Europe was viewed as a model to imitate and Argentine leaders felt their country needed to “Europeanize”. This excerpt exemplifies the high regard in which most Argentine leading elites held Europeans and helps to explain why Positivism, among other philosophies, were so widely accepted.

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17 It is important to note that he differentiates the citizens of the interior from Porteños here.
A synthesis of Sarmiento's embrace of Social Darwinism and Alberi's admiration of Europeans can be seen in the writings of the Argentine Positivists. Positivism became inextricably linked to Herbert Spencer's doctrine of Social Darwinism as it spread across the Atlantic. In his essay “The Modern Crowd” (1899), José María Ramos Mejía, a congressman and later head of the Department of Heath, wrote about the social forces that he believed were at work within Argentine society. He, like other positivists, was an elite and shared typical societal anxieties such as a fear of racial mixing and the effects of ever-increasing numbers of immigrants. These all influenced his writings on the “Modern Crowd”, in which he argued that immigrants were willing to do whatever was necessary to move forward and then ‘classified’ the immigrants into three groups, all of which had despicable characteristics.

These primary sources demonstrate how attitudes toward government and the issue of immigration evolved over time. Although all the authors I have discussed are male, this reflects the prevalent philosophies of the period; the vast majority of leading elitess at the time were male.

**Women in Society and Philanthropy**

By the late 1880s, elite government officials and leading elitess saw Buenos Aires as an over-crowded metropolis confronting a myriad of social problems, such as poverty, disease, and immorality. The most common responses to these social ills were legislation and the advent of female philanthropic organizations such as the Sociedad de Beneficencia, which was almost entirely government-funded. I examined these two developments through Karen Mead's article, "Gender, Welfare, and The Catholic Church in Argentina:"
Conferencias de Señoras de San Vincente de Paul, 1890-1916” and Donna Guy’s “Lower-Class Families, Women, and the Law in Nineteenth-Century Argentina”.

Mead examines the role of women in Social Catholicism in Argentina written in English. Her examination of the Conferencias de Señoras de San Vincente de Paul discusses how Pope Leo XIII attempted to stop the influence of socialism in Argentina. Ingenieros, a leader of the Argentine Positivists, came from a family of Socialists and in his article, “Bourgeois Snakes Go to the Sanctuary”, he attacks charity organizations as bastions of bourgeois culture. Additionally, the Conferencias acted in accordance with the very principles, such as compassion, which Ingenieros held as anti-evolutionary. Positivist doctrine held that everything could be explained through science, a stance that placed it in direct conflict with the Church. Positivists saw the compassion of the philanthropists, particularly the Conferencias, as harmful to the evolutionary process because it interfered with the national selection process.

The Conferencias accomplished vast changes to the social welfare system through organization and their ability to camouflage their efforts to advance the position of women beyond what was considered appropriate. For example, their efforts at the Casa de Santa Felicita were unique because they recognized that female-headed families needed to be able to provide for their families and the best way to do this was factory employment, where women could be closely monitored. However, the Conferencias still preferred to see women employed as household servants because it was in keeping with “traditional

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values."\(^{21}\) Most importantly, argues Mead, they were very in touch with the needs and attitudes of the poor because they frequently made house calls to deliver vouchers and spread their "evangelical message."\(^{22}\) This was contrary to sociedades such as La Sociedad de Beneficia which outsourced most of the direct contact with the poor to Catholic nuns; a process more in line with traditional elitist values. Through all of their endeavors, the upper-class women of the Conferencias were motivated by their adherence to Catholic maxims: they desired to see marriages and baptisms in the poor communities they aided. In contrast, the Positivists who wanted science to 'triumph' over Christianity.

In her article, "Lower-Class Families, Women, and the Law in Nineteenth-Century Argentina", Guy examines the plight of female-headed households as one of the problems caused by the migration of males in order to find work. The large numbers of immigrants competing for the same jobs forced men into the interior to search for work, leaving their wives and children in Buenos Aires. Positivists considered these female-headed households to be a problem and devoted their energies to regulating these in order to create a patriarchal nation. Eventually, the government created a legal system that institutionalized patriarchy as a substitute for the absentee men. Guy's article provides an analysis of the impact of this system on women and therefore represents an important historiographical, published in 1985, it is one of the first examinations of the impact of the legal system on Argentine women in the nineteenth century. She determined that the extent of the subordination of women varied by region and on the individual male

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\(^{21}\) At the turn of the century, these values meant that the place of the woman was in the home; not out in the public sphere. Thus, domestic work, even in another woman's home, was most fitting for women.

household heads. Unfortunately, because it is an early contribution to the historiography, the work is not detailed.

In “Lower-Class Families,” Guy found that the institutionalized patriarchy during the nineteenth century rested on economics. Female work was heavily regulated because of the dueling interests of tradition and necessity, a truly modern dilemma. Early gender-based work laws typically applied to the poor and centered on vagrancy, a term whose definition was flexible, making it easy to maintain control. These foci were a result of the ‘risk’ the fatherless families constituted in Buenos Aires. The State became a surrogate male head of household, complete with the ability to control female employment. Unconcerned with protecting the women themselves, so much as the government wanted to protect the male-headed household, in which the males had control over the employment of the women, according to Guy it was a logical step for the government to legalize prostitution. Prostitution offered a pragmatic solution because there was a surplus of unemployed women and a demand for prostitutes among the male immigrants. This patriarchal legal structure displays the strong connection between family and state which leaders of the time idealized. Guy argues that this subordination of women was due to weak governmental institutions.

In her book, Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Buenos Aires, Guy discusses the legal regulation of prostitutes between 1870 and 1930. This work is important in understanding the unique attitude toward prostitution that was

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24 Ibid, 326.
25 Ibid, 327.
26 Ibid, 322.
prevalent in Buenos Aires. In “Lower-Class Families” Guy argues that the government relied on the family as the basic structure of society because governmental institutions were not strong enough to ensure stability. In *Sex and Danger*, she elaborates, stating, “if women’s social and economic roles linked family and nation, then women who existed outside traditional family structures threatened the nation.”27 When referencing “women who existed outside traditional family structures”, Guy principally refers to prostitutes. However, she then goes on to discuss how various Argentine leading elites and government officials, such as Ingenieros saw prostitution as an alternative to monogamy, a practice that he considered to be counter-evolutionary.28 In fact, it was groups from Europe such as the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women, founded in London in 1855, which were most concerned by the negative effects of prostitution. Unfortunately, Guy’s work does not have any primary sources that discuss the feelings or experiences of the women housed in these brothels. Although the residents of the Buenos Aires bordellos weren’t part of traditional family units, they were still subject to medical examinations, discipline from house madams and the police if their behavior was deemed obscene.29

Kristen Ruggiero also examines the subordination of women in her article, “Honor, Maternity, and the Disciplining of Women: Infanticide in Late Nineteenth-Century Buenos Aires”. Ruggiero uses infanticide to discuss the dual ideals of honor and shame within Buenos Aires; these gender based ideals were extremely influential in Argentine Positivism. She found that women who committed infanticide to conserve the honor of the father and

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28 Ibid, 93.
29 Ibid, 6.
herself, and was ashamed of the action, were often not given sentences in trials. This speaks to the prevalence of ‘traditional’ values that persisted in society in spite of the claims of ‘modernity’.

In spite of the uniformity with which women were suppressed, women played very different roles in society according to their social class. The elite women participated in numerous aid societies. As Guy argued in her book, *Women Build the Welfare State: Performing Charity and Creating Rights in Argentina, 1880-1955*, it was seen as a social boon to belong to organizations such as *La Sociedad de Beneficencia*. Many of these organizations aimed to help children and mothers; thus, helping to cement traditional values among the working class.

**European Immigration and Positivism**

The millions of immigrants often engendered resentment among native Argentines and added to the perceived, and real, social ills that Positivists aimed to fix. Elites also feared Anarchists and other radical groups from Europe would begin to cause trouble in Buenos Aires.\(^30\) The government thought that the working class, now largely immigrants, should be controlled based on traditional values.\(^31\) Many groups sought to solve the same problems that preoccupied the Positivists by forming mutual aid societies.\(^32\) In his seminal work, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930*, Jose C. Moya discussed the experiences of the large immigrant community. While they had the advantage of being fluent in Spanish, they were still considered outsiders and therefore

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\(^{30}\) This was not an irrational fear; many anarchists participated in activities which would today be called terrorist actions; they were responsible for killings and bombings, another other violent actions.

\(^{31}\) These traditional values typically changed with each government.

\(^{32}\) These societies, often based on nationality, helped members with things like medical costs and employment security.
created many mutual aid societies and other organizations to maintain close-knit communities. This trend, however, was not exclusively Spanish; many other immigrants, including Italians and Irish, banded together to preserve their European cultures.

Interestingly, before the peak years of immigration began in the 1880s, Argentines were much more receptive to certain immigrant groups than others. In her book on Irish immigration, *Irish 'Ingleses'*; Helen Kelly argued that the Irish were treated with respect because they were considered to be English. The English, in turn, were accorded respect because of their economic investments in Argentina. However, Kelly devoted a substantial amount of space to a discussion of the statistical shortcomings regarding actual numbers of Irish immigrants. Most Argentine records group all of the British Isles populations under the term 'Ingleses'. This shortcoming made it difficult for Kelly to argue convincingly about the extent of Irish immigration to Argentina.

As both Moya and Kelly pointed out, immigrant groups used newspapers to maintain their communities. *The Standard* and *The Southern Cross* were two prominent English-language newspapers.

Immigrant groups, especially the Italians, contributed to elite fears of socialism and anarchism, which the Positivists often held, as well. According to Ricardo Salvatore, immigrants contributed to unionization, strikes, and upsurges in anarchism and socialism.33 This fear on the part of the elites was a legitimate one; Italians were known for their anarchist movements and many immigrants were, in fact, at the heart of these movements in Argentina.

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Immigrant groups were a strong force in Argentine society for a multitude of reasons. By the early 1900s, immigrants formed a vast majority of the population within Buenos Aires. These large numbers facilitated different types of trans-Atlantic communication and led to the spread of new ideas and philosophies, scientific advances, and political ideologies. This caused elite fears, policy changes, and cultural shifts, creating a truly unique national landscape.

Comparative histories of immigration in Argentina and other localities are also important to the historiography. Carl Solberg’s monograph, *Immigration and Nationalism: Argentina and Chile, 1890-1914*, discusses the rise of Nationalism in Argentina as a response to the massive numbers of immigrants flooding the country at the turn of the century. Solberg argues that the fears that mass immigrations would disrupt the status quo led to Nationalism. Samuel Baily’s *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914*, published in 1999, follows the fortunes of the Sola family to re-create the struggles and successes of Italian immigrants in Buenos Aires, as well as New York. These two works are unique, and therefore important, to the historiography of the subject because they are comparative studies; this helps to contextualize the phenomenon of immigration as a global event and a force within Argentina.

Solberg’s work, published in 1970, has served as the basis for many other historians’ works for several key reasons. He focuses his discussion on the upper classes because “political decision making was not based on mass opinion”\(^{34}\) but was instead concentrated in the hands of the elite. To make his argument, he draws on popular newspapers and

magazines, parliamentary debates, the works of intellectuals and writers, and the publications of economic interest groups. Solberg’s narrative fits in with the view that elites consciously tried to concentrate power in their hands to prevent immigrants from disrupting the status quo. In particular, Solberg analyzes upper-class views on the social and economic impacts of immigration, the use of immigrants as scapegoats, the immigrants as “unwelcome participants” in politics, and the use of nationalism as a remedy for the immigrant problem. *Immigration and Nationalism* discusses at length the unique problem which middle-class, entrepreneur immigrants represented for Argentine elite. He argues that these immigrants, in particular, alarmed elites because they upset the status quo; they contributed to the construction of an urban middle class, yet another threat to elite power. In many ways, Solberg’s work has lead to further research and discussion.

Samuel Baily’s *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914* builds on Solberg’s work in comparative history. In this book, he uses the Sola family, a web of relatives stretching from Valdengo, Italy to Buenos Aires and New York City, as an example for immigrant networks. He argues that these networks not only contributed to immigration patterns but also determined the success of immigrants in their destinations. This work is particularly pertinent to understanding elite fears and Porteño society since Italians were the single largest immigrant community in Buenos Aires. Baily’s discussion of Argentine perceptions of the Italian immigrants furthers Solberg’s hypothesis regarding elite fears and power. Ultimately, Baily argues that Buenos Aires enabled

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immigrants to quickly assimilate.\textsuperscript{36} What Baily sees as a favorable environment for Italians was due in large part to the attitude of the elites running the government; Baily relies heavily on primary source documentation from immigrants, and comparative study with New York City, to draw this conclusion.

Solberg and Baily’s comparative studies allowed them to draw unique conclusions, which are useful in studying turn of the century Argentina. Solberg’s focus on the middle class immigrants and Baily’s assertion that Buenos Aires was a hospitable environment for immigrants contribute significantly to the historiography of European immigration to Argentina by placing it in a more global framework of immigration patterns.

\textit{Conclusion}

Turn-of-the-Century Argentina was shaped by a multitude of inter-related factors, such as Positivism, European immigration, French cultural influence, and the role of women, both as workers and mothers. Primary sources and secondary sources help to reconstruct the diverse cultural phenomenon that took place in fin-de-siècle Argentina. The immigrant populations led to major cultural changes such as a new professional class influenced by Europeans, especially the French, which led the country. As “modernity” took hold of Argentina, traditional and “modern” ideals began to clash, such as philanthropy and Positivism, adding to the tumult.

However, the sources used for this historiography lack the female perspective, as well as the perspective of the Church in regards to ‘modernity’. Buenos Aires had the daunting task of confronting both the Modern Age and a cultural invasion at once and these

events affected every aspect of society. Translated primary sources focus on male professional views of the events.
Works Cited


