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NATIONS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN URBAN LATIN AMERICA: THE CASE OF BUENOS AIRES

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Abstract

Literature has long argued that the nation is a community, either “imagined”, “invented”, or of “sentiment”. The existence of such a “national community” has strongly relied upon the assumption that members share –or feel/believe that they share-- something/s in common. It stands to reason that members of the national community, therefore, should have some degree of consciousness as to what unites them as a nation. Theoretically, they ought to somewhat concur in identifying the features that characterize their nations and differentiates them from others. Very seldom, however, has literature asked members of the nation what the nation means to them. This is precisely what I do in this paper, thereby questioning well-known arguments in current literature. First, I seek to establish to what degree, if any, the nation exists as a construct in the popular imaginary. Second, I attempt to identify the concepts and images that members of the nation associate with their being Argentinean, Uruguayan, or Spaniard, etc. Third, I detect the associations that members of the nation make between themselves as individuals and their national identity.

Key Words: Nation, Nationalism, National identity, Urban Identity, Latin America, Argentina, Buenos Aires

* Our views are personal and do not necessarily represent the position of the Universidad del Cema.

Why worrying about the nation and nationalism? For one, unlike what was predicted in the early 1990s, issues connected to national identity and the conceptualization of nations have not faded away. In fact, in the last decades they have continued to guide international and domestic policy making. Second, policies associated with national identity, nationalism, and the sovereignty of nations have become central both for the functioning of states and the global system. More than ever in recorded history collective national identities are linked to individual identities to the point in which people around the globe believe that their personal well-being depends on the well-being of their nations. The writing of national histories and the defense of national values, customs, cultures and ways of life has not only been taken up by intellectuals and grass roots organizations but also by villages, cities, counties, regional governments, and states. One can conclude that nations are not just intellectual, cultural, and ethnic constructs; rather, they materialize political and institutional practices that create a concrete day-to-day reality ingrained in the social and economic life of countries. They are indeed no longer an “exception” to world history.¹ In our world they provide, in fact, the stuff of history.

The centrality of national identity and nationalism is self-evident in the fact that most of today’s wars are either fought by nations that want to have their own state or by ethnic and religious groups that aspire to become independent nations within the same state. Andreas Wimmer has just published an illuminating book in which, among other things, gives exact figures as to the current ethno-nationalization of war and the progressive warring nature of the modern nation-state.² Surely terrorism and unabashed conflict in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere express internal, regional, and external wars connected to the distribution of resources. Yet at the same time these kinds of conflict are fueled by clashes between different notions of *the national* and strong nationalism expressing communal loyalties connected to ethnicity, religion, and politics. The definition, study and development of “the nation” and “*national identity*”, therefore, are not only of theoretical and academic importance but also affect practical issues of conflict resolution and governance.

¹ Whether one can still consider nations an “exception” surely depends upon the historical timeline under scrutiny. On the exceptionality of nations see McNeill, William H. (1986) *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, pp 28-30. Today, few can doubt the actuality and importance of nations.

² Wimmer, Andreas. 2013. *Waves of War: Nationalism, State Formation, and Ethnic Exclusion in the Modern World*. Cambridge University Press, see especially figure 1.2 and pp 3-5.

Whether or not people believe that they actually belong to a “national community” or feel an “attachment” to one another through a unifying “national identity” has, historically, constituted an essential part of power centralization and policy making. At least since the sixteenth century rulers have tried to create and encourage a sense of unifying identity. Thus it is not surprising that theories about nation making have long been associated with theories of the state, problems of centralization of authority, and legitimacy. The terms *nation-state* and *national-state* have indeed been coined to capture these connections. To those in power the imposition of some sort of shared consciousness about belonging to a larger group (the nation) is of utmost importance because they usually claim to rule in the interests of that particular group. To the bureaucratic apparatus of the state and rulers this is vital because public institutions are supposed to regulate and structure transactions among members of a given “national community” and defend the “national interest”.

To which degree have elites succeeded at national identity building? Abundant and fascinating historical and comparative work on the nation, nationalism and national identity has argued that that for the most part elites have been able to impose some sort of consensus as to what the nation stands for and the characteristics of national identity.³ An overwhelming majority of authors has also agreed that governments fervently encourage nationalism and emotional attachment to nationalistic symbols like the flag, constitutions, historical sites, founding fathers, and the like.⁴ Be that as it

³ Among many other contributions see, for instance, Hobsbawm, Eric J. [Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality](#). Cambridge, University Press, 1990; Hill, Christopher L. [National History and the World of Nations: Capital, State and the Rhetoric of History in Japan, France, and the United States](#), Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2008; Greenfeld Liah, [Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity](#), Harvard University Press, 1992, and [The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth](#), Harvard University Press, 2003; Guibernau, Montserrat, [Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century](#), Cambridge, Polity Press; Anderson, Benedict R. [Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism](#). London: Verso, 1983, and [Under Three Flags: Anarchism and Anti-Colonial Imagination](#). London: Verso, 2005; Bell, David, [The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800](#), Cambridge, University Press, 2003; Jusdanis Gregory, [The Necessary Nation](#), Princeton University Press, 2001, and most of the contributors to Hutchinson, John and Anthony Smith (eds) [Nationalism](#), Oxford, University Press, 1994.

⁴ Among others, Anderson, Benedic, op. cit. 1982; Alvarez Junco, Jose, (2013) “Spanish National Identity in the Age of Nationalisms”, in Centeno, M. and A. Ferraro, eds., [Republics of the Possible](#), Cambridge, University Press; Anna, Timothy, (1998) [Forging Mexico](#), University of Nebraska Press; Bertoni, Ana, (2001) [Patriotas, Cosmopolitas, y Nacionalistas. La Construcción de la Nacionalidad Argentina a fines del Siglo XIX](#), Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica; Vom Hau, Matthias, “Unpacking the School: Textbooks, Teachers, and the Construction of Nationhood in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru”, [Latin American Research Review](#), 44: 3 (2009), pp. 127-154; Mosse, George, [The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany](#)

may, we do not yet possess enough empirical data in terms of to the degree to which governments and nation makers have actually succeeded at installing these notions upon the collective imaginary. Does the type of nation that people conceive or imagine resemble those that the state and public institutions try to promote? The data below indicates that the Argentine government has only partially succeeded at imposing symbols associated with the national upon the collective imaginary. A large percentage of the urban population does not appear to have integrated notions of the national promoted by the state into their imaginary. A significant number of the inhabitants of Buenos Aires do not associate the nation with founding fathers, flags, national history, other patriotic symbols and/or war heroes.

The surveys presented here aim at gauging the ways in which members of a particular nation actually picture or “imagine” the *nation* of which they are supposed to be a part. From Ernest Renan to Max Weber onto Eric Hobsbawm, Liah Greenfeld or Benedict Anderson, to mention only a few, this has remained a half resolved issue. First, one needs to inquire into whether or not this imagining and conceptualizing creates an enough degree of consensus for members of the nation to be able to differentiate their nation from other nations. Second, one needs to ask how the particular imaginary of “the nation” connects with other collective imaginaries. If, as literature has argued, nations are to be understood as special kinds of “communities”, it stands to reason that its members would need to somehow perceive the distinctiveness of their particular national community, and that they would also need to have a sense of what unites them with other members. The data gathered here does not fully sustain these assumptions.

My focus in this paper is on urban national identity and, more specifically, on the city of Buenos Aires.⁵ The paper also borrows data from

from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich. New York, Howard Ferting, 1975, and Lopez-Alves, Fernando, “Nation-States and Nationalist States: Latin America in Comparative Perspective”, in Hanagan, Michael and Tilly, Chris (eds.) Contention and Trust in Cities and States, Springer, 2011.

⁵ The Program of Public Opinion of the Universidad de la Matanza, Buenos Aires, Argentina, carried out the survey that provides the main database for this paper during July-October 2012. Raul Aragon, Director of that Program, deserves special recognition for his contribution to the questionnaire used in this survey and the interpretation of the obtained results. Samples were constructed as follows: Universe: Residents of the autonomous city of Buenos Aires plus its surrounding areas (*AMBA, Area Metropolitana Buenos Aires, Greater Buenos Aires*, comprising 24 municipalities) older than 18 year of age. Type of sample: simple. Data crossings: gender, socio-economic levels, and age categories. Size of sample: 1,300 effective cases. Margin

poll samples on related subjects that I conducted in the same city during 2005-2007.⁶ As we shall soon see, the concepts of nationalism, national pride, national identity, and the nation have different but related meanings. Here, I am interested in exploring the nation and national identity. I am concerned with whether or not the nation is, as literature has assumed, an installed and embracing concept in the collective imaginary. Thereby, I also explore the ways in which members of the nation conceive of their national identity.

Why cities? First, urban imageries of the nation are one of the most important chapters of the industrial revolution and modernization. Most research has shown that, at least in the West, cities provide the center of gravity of modernization, the initial phases in the expansion of the secular state, and the first stages of development of an encompassing national identity. In the case of Latin America cities also supply an excellent opportunity to explore fascinating combinations of modern and post-colonial conceptualizations of the national.

Second, urban public opinion in Latin American captures the collective imaginary of a very significant part of the national population. The region stands as one of the most urbanized in the world and in most countries the majority of the population lives in cities, especially capital cities. In the case of Buenos Aires, the city and the greater Buenos Aires area lodge 12.801.365 million inhabitants against 41.709.502 million for the country as a whole. Its metro density is 3.342.39 square kilometers. One expects imaginaries of the nation in rural areas and smaller towns to differ from those of cosmopolitan urban centers. I take that assumption as valid but I do not explore rural or smaller cities. Rather, I am interested in large urban conglomerates where sizeable percentages of the population reside and where public institutions and major bureaucracies have their largest hubs. Finally, cities also offer promising grounds to test arguments that connect national identity with globalization, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and migration.

of error of this sample for the city of Buenos Aires and *AMBA* Buenos Aires: +/- 2.8%; (for P = 0.50).
Questionnaire: Structured, closed and open.

⁶ These prior polls in the city of Buenos Aires served as part of the primary data for Fernando Lopez-Alves' "Uncertainty, the Construction of the Future, and the Divorce Between Citizens and the State in Latin America", in F. Lopez-Alves and Diane Johnson (ed.), Globalization and Uncertainty in Latin America, Palgrave/McMillan, 2007

I take a cognitive approach and argue that levels of consciousness about the nation and national identity provide the key building blocks of these two concepts. Using a cognitive approach to the study of the nation is of course not news. Montserrat Guibernau, for instance, defines the nation thus: “By nation I refer to a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself”.⁷ The importance that Guibernau attributes to “consciousness” in this definition coincides with my own, since I try to capture some of that consciousness through opinion polls. As we shall see, however, I differ with Guibernau as to what this consciousness is about. Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as a community that lives in the minds of members rather than as a real entity also coincides with my approach. He, indeed, has characterized the nation as an “imagined community” of solidarity that unites its members in a similar “imagining”.⁸ Others using a cultural approach have also stressed shared consciousness about the nation as a key component of national identity.⁹ This literature shades light into the results obtained below. Yet an important finding is that although people may believe that they perhaps share something with others that unites them as nationals of the same nation, when it comes to defining what that may be for the most part opinions differ. In the city of Buenos Aires nationals, in fact, imagined their nation in rather different ways and therefore they did not necessarily “share” a similar imagining.

Since the concept of “*national identity*” is arguably associated to a given degree of self-consciousness about belonging to a “nation”, cognitive theory has also been used to study this particular identity as well. Like much good literature has claimed, it is consciousness about belonging to a national community that sustains national identity. Liah Greenfeld for example argues that national identity “...is an identity which derives from membership in a ‘people’, the fundamental characteristic of which is that it is defined as a

⁷ Guibernau, Montserrat, Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996, pg 47. See also Judanis,

⁸ Anderson, Benedict R. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso, 1983. For additional nuances on this argument, see as well his Under Three Flags: Anarchism and Anti-Colonial Imagination. London: Verso, 2005.

⁹ Judanis, Gregory (2001) The Necessary Nation Princeton University Press

'nation'.¹⁰ She writes: "Every member of the 'people' thus interpreted partakes in its superior, elite quality, and it is in consequence that a stratified national population is perceived as essentially homogeneous and the lines of status and class superficial".¹¹ Greenfeld's comparative historical argument, thus, connects national identity to people's consciousness about the existence of a human community sharing a sense of equality. The opinions of the inhabitants of Buenos Aires about their national identity only partially correspond with this definition, although further research is needed to provide comparative answers as to whether or not members of different nations view themselves as equals. In the case of Latin America some authors have in fact argued the opposite: nations in the region, they have claimed, seem hierarchically constructed and thus not built upon a sense of equality.¹² I did not obtain confirmation for neither of these arguments in the survey data.

The way in which I use cognitive theory in this paper leads to a "from the bottom-up" approach because I assume that the existence of nations and the actuality of national identity depend upon what members of the nation make of them both. We know much more about what elites, states, and intellectuals think about the nation and what it means to them. We know much less about what the bulk of the population believes the nation to be. I do not examine how grass roots organizations, political parties, governments, or social movements depict or define the nation. Rather, I am interested in the way common citizens view theirs and thus explore the nation as the resulting aggregate of the conceptualizing and imagining of its individual members.

Discussing nationalism Hobsbawm long argued that if we were to figure out the "sentiments" of the majority toward the nation –especially, according to him, the illiterate— we would run into insurmountable

¹⁰ Greenfeld's correct emphasis on the nation as a community stems from her distinction between the nation and nationalism. Like for many others back to Ernest Renan and Max Weber, she associates the nation with a "community" that stands as an independent entity.

¹¹ Greenfeld, Liah, Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity, Harvard University Press, 1992, pp 14-17

¹² Lomnitz, Claudio. 2001. "Nationalism as a Practical System: Benedict Anderson's Theory of Nationalism from the Vantage Point of Spanish America", in M. A. Centeno and F. Lopez-Alves (eds.) The Other Mirror: Grand Theory Through The Lens of Latin America, Princeton, University Press, pp. 329-359

difficulties.¹³ This and other similar claims have encouraged a top-heavy approach in which popular beliefs have hardly found a place in the analysis. I argue that they should. Historically speaking Hobsbawm is basically right; for the most part, when it comes to the popular imagery of the nation, the historical record is poor. Nonetheless, we can inquire about these loyalties and opinions at the present time using, among other things, opinion polls. Surprisingly, there is scarce precedent in the literature in terms of similar studies, except work that has focused on the strength of nationalism and citizens' degree of pride about their countries.¹⁴

I. Nations in The Popular Imaginary

Do people really “imagine” or “feel” that they are part of a nation? Do they feel Argentinean, American, Chilean, or Spaniard? And, if they do, what does that mean? The data analyzed below show that in fact members of the Argentine nation widely differ as to the meaning of the word “nation” and in terms of what they think they share with other members of the same nation. We obtain a fragmented imaginary that does not always correspond with established scholarly definitions.

I suggest that we need to rethink at least four basic notions that have permeated work on the nation and nationalism:

1) That the nation can be best described as a *community* in which members are supposed to be united by similar imaginaries, feelings, and conceptualizations regarding their belonging to a nation. It has long been argued that every national community is bound by a “love of the nation” that creates some sort of consensus as to what that nation means. Since nations are supposed to be different from one another and every national community would be conscious of what differentiates it from other nations, it follows that meanings attached to the concept of nation should differ from

¹³ Hobsbawm, Eric J. Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality. Cambridge, University Press, 1990, p. 48

¹⁴ For example, see the studies made by [www/parametria.com](http://www.parametria.com) in the occasion of the bicentennial of Latin American Independence (2011). These opinion polls tried to measure degrees of pride about being Mexican, Guatemalan, Colombian, and so forth. These interesting surveys fall more into the measuring of national pride and the strength of nationalism than into the depiction of imaginaries of the nation or the way members of a nation conceive their national identity. Indirectly, market studies on branding in connection to cultural diversity have touched upon issues of national identity but also in a very different way and with different research goals in mind. See for instance, Athias, Leonardo and Fabian Etchegaray, “Branding National Assets amidst Global Diversity: Differences and Similarities Across Three Latin American Markets”, paper presented at Esomar Global Diversity Conference, Miami 8-1- May, 2006.

one nation to another. While this may be true and to check this theory one would need more comparative data based on public opinion other things, the data gathered indicates that members of the nation do not conceive their nations in a consensual way. Answers were also ambiguous in terms of what would differentiate this particular urban national identity from others. How much of a consensus about meaning would be needed for the nation to exist in the way literature has described it? This remains an open question that needs, again, further research. What I can argue at this point, however, is that the inhabitants of the large urban conglomerate examined here neither necessarily agree upon what their nation and national identity means to them, nor about what would differentiate them from other nations.

2) That the nation is primarily associated with people. Literature has argued that nations are indeed communities that have the right to sovereignty and self-determination. Yet the data below demonstrate that at least in the minds of the inhabitants of the largest city of Argentina the nation is also strongly associated with geographical location, and that at times this association is stronger than the connection between “nation” and a community of people. This means, among other things, that the central role that current literature has assigned to shared values, horizontal solidarity, and the physical characteristics of human populations in defining the nation, loses terrain in favor of location and territory, concepts usually associated with “patria”, “motherland”, and “homeland”. While in academic parlance these concepts differ from one another, in the minds of our respondents conceptual divisions are blurred and significant overlapping occurs. Maybe it is time to reconsider our terminology in lieu of what members of the nation believe their nations to be.

3) That the major cleavages working against horizontal solidarity and unity in a national community are ethnic, religious, and racial. These variables do play a role in the day-to-day practices of identity and it has indeed been argued that only smaller nations united by a common ethnicity would represent the ideal (and at times the only) incarnation of nations.¹⁵ The major differences in opinion that we detected in the population of Buenos Aires regarding national identity and the meaning of the word “nation”,

¹⁵ Connor, Walker, (1987) “Ethnonationalism” in Myron Weiner and Samuel Huntington (ed.) Understanding Political Development, HarperCollins, pp 196-221; see also his 1994 book Ethnonationalism, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

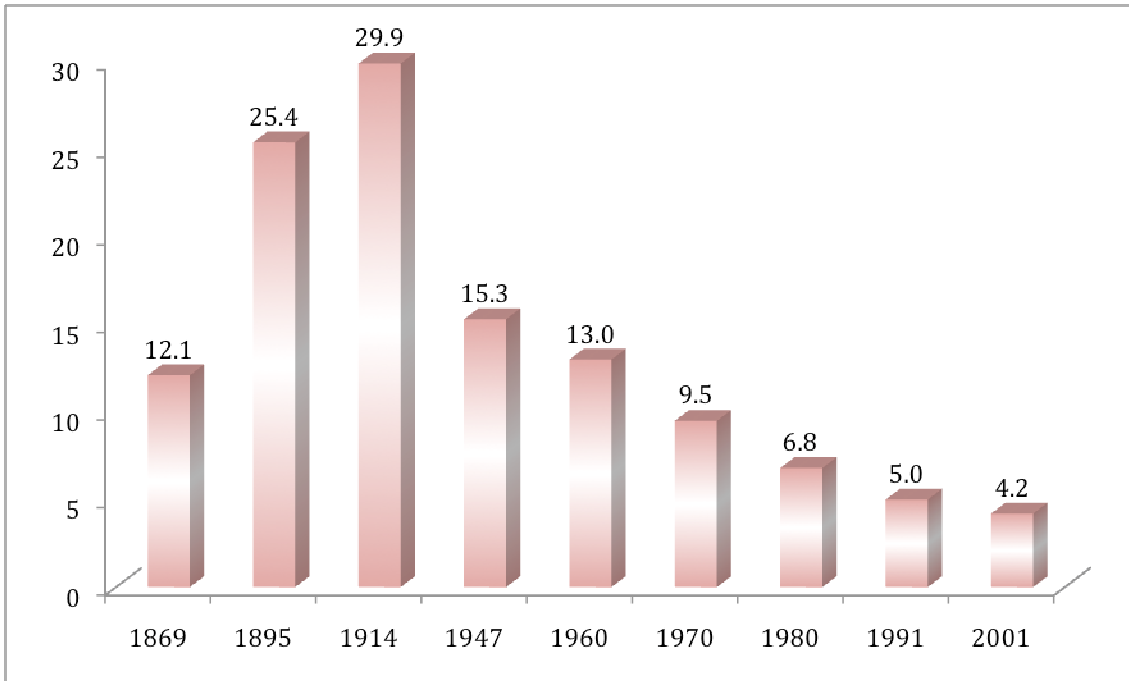
however, do not correspond to these splits, which in the city of Buenos Aires are rather weak. One finds a population roughly distributed along these categories: 88.9% whites, 7% “mixed”, 2% Asian, and 1% black. The category “white” is very different and more encompassing than the one used in the USA, and it includes peoples of Italian, Spanish, Polish, Croatian, English, Swedish, Russian, Hungarian, Uruguayan and Portuguese origins. Also Syrian and Lebanese communities have declared themselves to be “white”, category that usually emphasizes skin color rather than culture. One needs to find, therefore, a different type of explanation for the dissenting views of the national that emerge in the survey data.

4) That cultural differences explain the weakness of nations. Literature has argued that multiculturalism seems to work against the consolidation of nations and the construction of national identity; indeed, some have claimed that the multicultural character of nations poses an obstacle for their very existence.¹⁶ Nonetheless, here I show evidence to indicate that in a rather culturally homogeneous population strong differences regarding the meaning of the nation and the content of national identity do exist. If one assumes that multiculturalism is a major obstacle for nation making, one should also assume that more homogeneous cultures should show higher consensus regarding the way people conceive their nations and identity. I did not find this in Buenos Aires.

The city is not strongly multicultural and it does not compare with cities like London, Los Angeles, or New York. Rather, Buenos Aires represents a case of what one could call “mild” multiculturalism. For one, large immigration waves stopped by the end of WWII and even before that time the numbers of immigrants arriving to Argentine shores had, in comparison to the late nineteenth century and the WWI period, lessened. During the last decades the city has received much lesser foreign immigration in relative and absolute terms. This can be seen in Table 1, which depicts the percentages of foreigners in Argentina since 1869 to 2001.

Foreign Populations in Argentina: 1869-2001

¹⁶ See this discussion in Kramer, Lloyd, (211) Nationalism in Europe and America: Politics, Cultures, and Identities since 1775, Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina Press



Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, Buenos Aires, (INDEC), 2010. Charted by Fernando Lopez-Alves and Raul Aragon.

At the time of writing the foreign population in the whole of the Argentine territory continues to be 4.2%, and given the openness of Argentine immigration policies almost the entirety of this population enjoys legal status. Compare with Canada’s legal immigrant population (18.1%) or the United States (12.1%) and Germany (12%).¹⁷ Historically a land of recent settlement with abundant immigration, today the foreign population of Argentina only ranks a bit higher than most of Latin America, except Venezuela (4.2%) and Costa Rica, which ranks higher (7.5%). Traditionally, and similarly to most of Latin American capital cities, most new comers arrive to Buenos Aires from the countryside and other cities of the interior. Indeed, foreign immigrants did not prominently figure in our sample of 1300 cases (only 0.5 % of our sample declared to be immigrants from other countries).

Recent immigration includes Peruvians, Bolivians, Paraguayans, Africans, Koreans, Chinese, Russian, and Ukrainians, but their numbers amount to less than 8% of the population of the city (no exact figures are

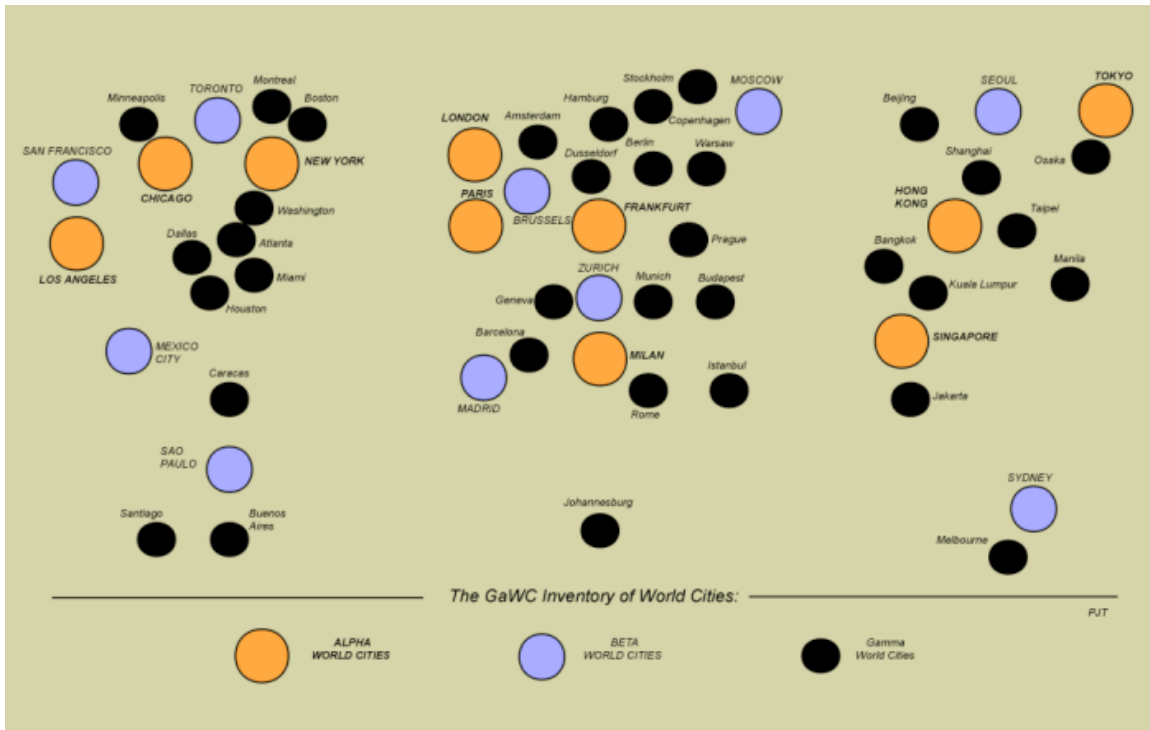
¹⁷ In absolute terms, however, the United States is the country that hosts most immigrants in the world.

available). Buenos Aires also possesses a large Jewish population of various origins that has resided in the city since the immigration waves that hit Argentina in the late nineteenth century. Because of dwindling immigration after the 1940s the European core immigrant group that landed in large numbers at Argentine shores --and especially in the Province of Buenos Aires-- during the late nineteenth century and early 1900s, has evolved into a desegregated, intermarried population who share a very similar culture.

In addition, Buenos Aires hosts a much smaller numbers of indigenous peoples and original populations in comparison to other South American cities like La Paz, Lima, Asuncion or Quito. Therefore, the fragmentation that our polls show in terms of how the population of Buenos Aires conceives its national identity is not straight forwardly related to cultural differences.

Lastly, despite increasing global communications, the use of social media, and the increasing imported terminology that one observes in the popular vocabulary (mainly from English and especially among the youth), one can still talk about a quite homegrown popular culture. In addition, the connection of the city with global networks is still lower than other major capital cities in the global system.

Figure 1 pictures world cities divided in three different categories: Alpha, Beta, and Gamma according to their importance as hubs of global networks, in that order. Buenos Aires falls into the Gamma category.



Source: [GaWC Research Bulletin no 5](#). World Cities Relational Data, 2009.

A brief detour into concept definition is needed before analyzing the survey data in some detail that must include a brief discussion about the meaning of concepts like nation, national identity, and nationalism.

II. Associated Concepts and Debates.

The most venerable precedent usually cited in terms of a specific definition of the nation is Ernest Renan. For him, the nation was a community defined by love. The “love of the nation” was “spontaneous” and “voluntary” and emerged “naturally among the members of a given community”. What is important to note in light of the fragmented definitions of the nation that emerge in the data analyzed below is that Renan came to this conclusion by discarding a number of other factors –common language, religion, ethnicity, and culture—that were, in his time and in ours, believed to provide the needed ingredients to glue members of nations with the larger whole. Renan found too many exceptions, that is, communities that despite being divided by race, ethnicity, and culture were still considered nations, and others in

which a common language did not seem to act as the most important binding factor. He concluded that these variables were not sufficient to explain the nation's communal character. A good indicator of the complexity of the matter—and of Renan's frustration in the search for a comprehensive definition—was that he settled for an explanation based on the “spontaneous” love of the nation.

Somehow similar to Renan's findings regarding the limitations of these variables, in Buenos Aires religion, ethnicity, and culture can neither explain the divides that we detected in the conceptualization of the nation, nor do they account for respondents' answers in regards to what they associated with their national identity. In terms of language, in this urban conglomerate 97% speak Spanish; thus we can safely say that language has very little to do with the major divides we detected in the imaginary of the nation. The only finding that works against Renan's argument is that he assumed the communal character of nations, while the survey data shows that at least in the minds of the bulk of this urban population that communal character is weaker than he might have assumed.

Renan's insistence upon the importance of “love of nation” was confirmed by the answers of many citizens of Buenos Aires who defined “being Argentinean” and “nation” by using words like “love” or “feelings” (approximately 45% of the sample). The rest, however, opted for different types of characterizations that did not involve explicit references to love, feeling, or emotional attachment. Renan did not distinguish his “love of nation” from other spontaneous loves (of country, motherland, territory, fellow compatriots, and so forth). Most of our respondents did not make that distinction either. Similar to Renan's, the inhabitants of the city of Buenos Aires did not really *define* the nation. Rather, almost half of the sample stressed their connection with the nation as “feelings” about an entity that for the most part, in their responses, remained undefined.

Max Weber's termed the nation a “community of sentiment” and he, like many others, stressed the word “community” in his definition. He also connected “nation” with a state that represented the nation's interests and aspirations. This provided an important foundation for a scholarly tradition that has greatly grown thereafter and that has defined the nation as a special kind of community. Only a minority of our sample, however, associated “nation” with community. They favored, instead, other characteristics of the nation that overlapped with notions that literature has connected more with patriotism, nationalism, the national character, and the like.

Regarding what literature has for a long time argued to be the main defining feature of nations, that is, the connection with a given state, only a small minority of our sample made an association between nation and public institutions, that is, the state. States make nations, but this does not mean that members of the nation can formulate a connection between nation and state institutions. One cannot conclude that public institutions have not influenced what people believe the nation to be. Much good work has indicated otherwise. The writing and teaching of national history has been fundamental in cementing the foundational myths of national identity, and most of that teaching has been done by the state itself. Christopher Hill, for instance, offers an interesting analysis of the modern character of nations looking at the writing of national history as an instrument of national consciousness creation, finding that national histories define nations as *communities* that relate to a specific state and territory.¹⁸ What I argue is that preferred definitions of the nation acquired through the teaching of national history and the educational system seem not to have effectively installed a collective representation of the nation as a community of horizontal solidarity connected to a particular territory. Again, only a group of respondents in the 1.300 case sample thought of the nation as a “community” and a large percentage separated the nation as a given territory from the conceptualization of the nation as community. In other words, in the minds of respondents both dimensions (community/territory) stood separate rather than intertwined (see figures 5 and 6). And, as indicated, only a small group of respondents associated their national identity to the state and its institutions. And only a very tiny minority chose to define the nation and their national identity following definitions that combined all the factors (community, territory, state) that those writing national histories have uploaded upon the nation.

In order to make better sense of the survey data presented below, a last word should be said about why nationalism and the nation are not one and the same. We know that people mobilize in response to nationalist

¹⁸ Hill, Christopher L. National History and the World of Nations: Capital, State and the Rhetoric of History in Japan, France, and the United States, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2008. He reminds us of the newness of nations: “...the nation, as a form of community that assumes the congruence of state, people, and territory, is a recent phenomenon and the exception in word history” p 14. See as well Jusdanis, Gregory (2001) The Necessary Nation Princeton University Press and Hughes, Michael. Nationalism and Society: Germany 1800-1945. London, Edward Arnold, 1988.

discourse, rally around flag and country, fiercely defend “the nation” and are willing to make sacrifices to guard what they take to be “theirs” as opposed to what they perceive as threatening and “alien”.¹⁹ Nationalism usually expresses a structured ideology, a call for collective action, a social movement or even a political party. Contrastingly, the nation is what this collective action is supposed to be about. While nationalism and the nation have obviously been historically connected and most evidence confirms their shared origins and roots, analytical distinctions are needed. Connor has long posed a useful differentiation between nationalism, the state, and the nation: “...nationalism emerges as an identification with, and loyalty to, the nation, not with or the state”.²⁰ One can say therefore that the love of nation (nationalism) stands separate from the entity—“the nation”— that is the object of its love.

Most evidence indicates that urban dwellers in Buenos Aires are rather nationalistic. As is the case elsewhere, nationalist fervor has increased at times of conflict and/or during periods of increasing global pressure. In the case of Argentina the Malvinas war of the early 1980s comes to mind. Yet despite this strong nationalism the population of Buenos Aires and the *AMBA* is splintered as to the meaning of the nation and the characteristics of its national identity. One can thus argue that nationalism can cohabit with fragmented definitions of the national.

Perhaps this should not come as a surprise. The distinctions between the terms “nation” and “nationalism” are not only confusing to Buenos Aires dwellers but also to scholars. In Hans Kohn’s 1939 classic work, for instance, the concepts of nation, nationalism (and also the state) overlapped, forming an inseparable and at times confusing trio.²¹

¹⁹ See this discussion in Luckacs, John. Democracy and Populism: Fear and Hatred. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005, pp 33-50

²⁰ Walker Connor, “The Dawning of Nations”, in Ichijo and Uzelac, Ichijo and Uzelac, (eds). When is the Nation? Routledge, 2005, p 40

²¹ Kohn, Hans, “The Nature of Nationalism”, The American Political Science Review, V. 33, no. 6, 1939 pp 1001-1021. Kohn’s work makes a worthy reading because he developed crucial insights that directly tie with debates about the nation and its meaning today. For one, he very much anticipated Benedict Anderson’s popular conceptualization of the nation as *a community* where members do not get to know one another face to face but still “imagine” that they belong to a larger group. Second, he weaved into his argument traditional notions of the nation like Max Weber’s and Ernest Renan, yet giving them a slightly new meaning.

These blurred conceptual boundaries between the nation and nationalism survived to this day. Anthony Marx, for instance, in an interesting comparative book on nationalism and the state does not depict nations and nationalism as neither historically distinct nor theoretically separable.²² Recently, Andreas Winner has argued that the “joint forces” of nationalism and the nation have driven the history of the last five centuries; yet he draws no major conceptual line between these two “forces”.²³ Hobsbawm and others had long written on nationalism and the nation in a similar way, arguing that nations can fuel nationalism but nationalism can also create nations.

Likewise, the connections between states and nations also appear blurred, e.g. the terms “nation-state” and “national-state”. Most literature has pictured state and nation building as intertwined processes but which shapes which and how they actually relate is still debatable.²⁴ Max Weber, again, claimed that a nation can “...adequately manifest itself in a state of its own; hence a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own”.²⁵ At the same time, a large bulk of literature has argued exactly the opposite, that is, states create nations rather than the other way round.²⁶ Economists and others who had written about the rise, decline, and prosperity of nations, for instance, have usually seen nations as the product of state institutions. Yet the chain of causality in this literature can also go both ways.²⁷ One can conclude that, in a way resembling the arguments that literature has posed when defining nations and nationalism, states can create

²² Marx, W. Anthony, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

²³ See Wimmer, Andreas. 2013. *Waves of War: Nationalism, State Formation, and Ethnic Exclusion in the Modern World*. Cambridge University Press

²⁴ For a fuller discussion on the overlappings and limitations of these terms, see Lopez-Alves, Fernando “Which State, Which Nation? States and National Identity in Europe, South America, and the US Compared, 1750-1930”, Working Papers no. 510, 2013, University of CEMA, Buenos Aires.

²⁵ Weber, “The Nation” as reproduced in John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith, *Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp 25. Most others agree; see (John Breuilly, Charles Tilly, Michael Mann, Miguel A. Centeno (2002), Anthony Marx (1998 and 2003), and Fernando Lopez-Alves (2000 and 2012).

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of this literature and possible lines of causality see Fernando Lopez-Alves, “Which State, Which Nation? States and National Identity in Europe, South America, and the United States Compared: 1750-1930” (2013) Working Papers, University of CEMA, Buenos Aires, no. 510; pp 8-15.

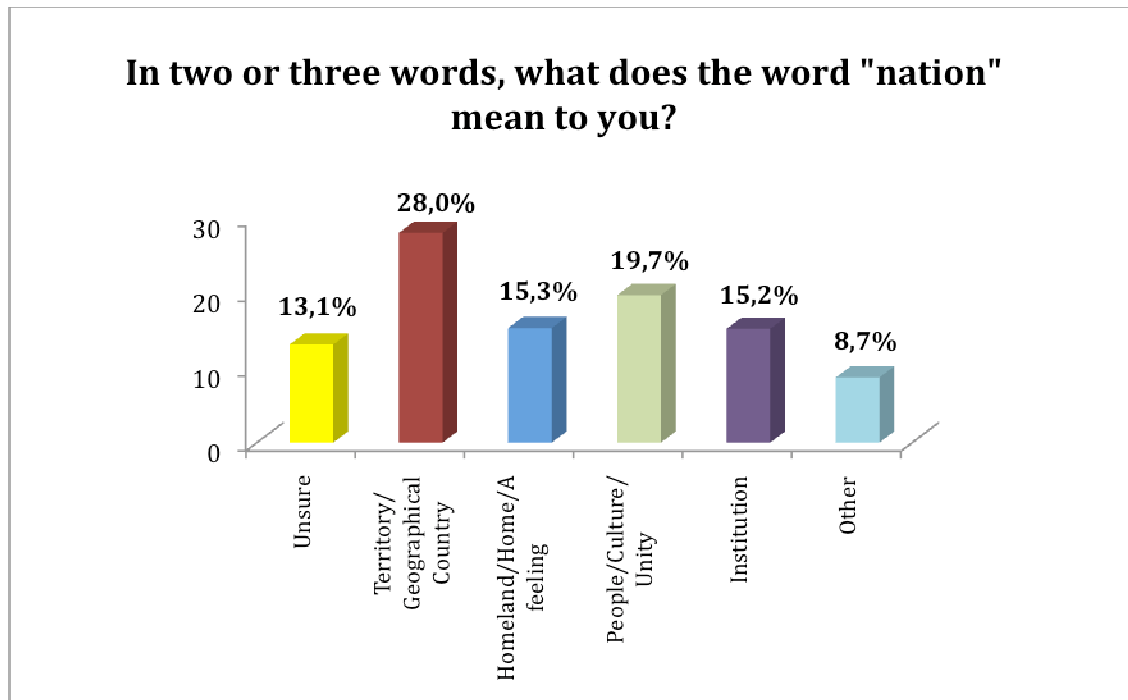
²⁷ See for instance Landes, David, (1999) *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are Rich and Some So Poor*, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, and Acemoglu, Daron and James A. Robinson, (2012) *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*. New York. Random House

nations and nations can also create states. Let us now look at the nation and national identity in the eyes of one particular urban population.

III. Urban Imaginaries of the Nation in the City of Buenos Aires

Question no. 1: *En dos o tres palabras, que quiere decir para usted la palabra “nacion”?* (In two or three words, what does the word “nation” mean to you?)

Figure 2 charts the respondents’ answers. Opinions were highly dissimilar and therefore they had to be clustered into different categories of meaning.



In this first question respondents were asked to express, in their own words, what the concept “nation” meant to them. As Figure 1 shows, 13.1 % of respondents declared not to know what the nation meant and 8.7% (grouped under the label of “other”) said not to be sure or to know “more or less” what it meant. If we were to merge these two categories we would reach the 22% of the total sample. This alone would indicate that for almost a quarter of the sample “the nation” did not elicit any concrete meaning.

The 78% who provided answers expressed divided opinions. Observe that only 19.7% of the sample identified the nation with “people” and “culture”, categories that are at the center of current definitions of the nation in the literature. This group did not identify the nation with a human community sharing in a common culture. Place of birth, geography, homeland, and territory, emerged as more popular answers. *Territorio, pais geografico* was the chosen answer of 28% of the sample. This association remained strong through the rest of the questions in the questioner.

Others (15.3%) gave answers connected to emotional attachment. The nation meant “*un sentimiento*” (a feeling), “love of the nation”, etc. Looking at this 15.3%, therefore, we can go back to Renan’s argument and say that this confirms his view. An important point to be made is that 10.3% within this group used who used feeling and love in connection to land and location rather than people.

If we add to this 10.3% those who made explicit references to territory and geography without using the word “feeling” or related notions (the abovementioned 28.0%), then we find that 38.3% related “nation” in a first or second instance to territory and geographical location. Scholarly literature has of course acknowledged the importance of territory when defining identity but it has for the most part also associated geography and territory with “patria” or “country”. I will come back to this very important association of *nation* with *territory* --as different from an association with people and community-- shortly below.

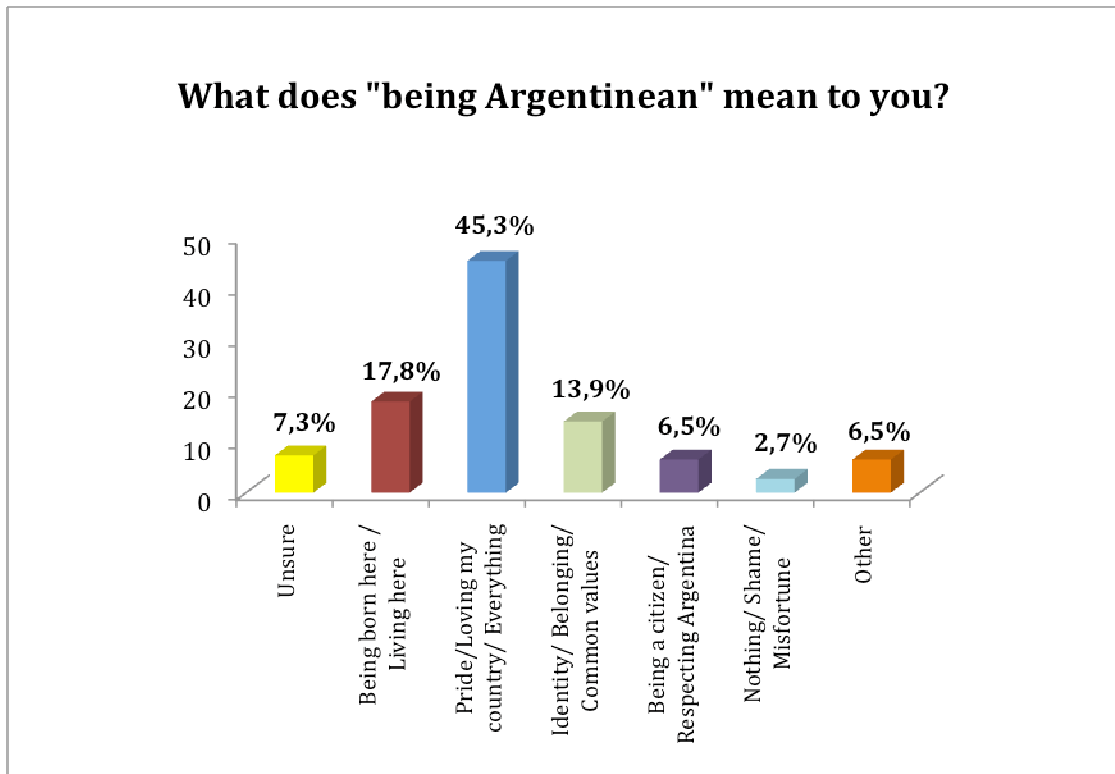
It is also interesting to note that only 15.2 % of respondents correlated “nation” with institutions, which for the majority meant public institutions. This makes one wonder whether in the popular imaginary of the nation the state (incarnated in its bureaucracies) is really perceived as a representation of the nation. I suspect a very weak association in light of the answers we obtained in relation to the following question (question 2).

Question Number 2: Que es para usted el ser argentino? (What does “being Argentinean” mean to you?)

One could argue that question no. 1 was too hard and maybe even misleading. People do not talk about the meaning of the word “nation” on a daily basis or are seldom asked to describe it in their own words. Surely it is widely used in public discourse but very seldom people are interrogated as to its meaning. To sort this problem out, the rest of the questionnaire posed basically the same type of question but in lesser abstract terms. Asking about

the meaning of “being Argentinean” question number two (2) intended to use a more familiar terminology. Figure 3 shows the answers.

Figure 3



Argentino/a is a very commonly used word closely associated with national identity. At what point after independence did Argentineans start to call themselves “Argentineans”? The question is significant because national identity tends to be linked to that moment in which a group of people starts defining themselves as a larger community. As Timothy Anna has argued for Mexico, at some point in the history of the country people began to refer to themselves as “Mexicans”; that, according to Anna, marked the beginning of Mexican national identity.²⁸ One can argue likewise for most of Latin America. My point is that the terms Mexican, Argentinean, Peruvian, Uruguayan, etc. can be taken to mean expressions of identity. Yet, what does this label really mean for the members of a particular nation? Figure 3 charts their responses in the case of Buenos Aires.

²⁸ Anna, Timothy, Forging Mexico, University of Nebraska Press, 1998, pp 14-16.

As can be seen in Figure 3, this question elicited more responses. 7.3% of the sample, however, still declared not to know what it meant. In addition, some respondents within the 2.7% of the sample who provided derogatory answers said that being Argentinean meant “nothing”; within this same group others preferred answers like “a shame”, a “misfortune”, or “meaningless”. In the category “others” (6.5%) some responded that being Argentinean was “nothing of importance”. In sum, while this question elicited more responses than question 1, when one adds up negative answers or derogatory ones, a rough 12% of the sample did not provide any concise answer or did not respond altogether.

Among those who gave concrete responses, definitions of “being Argentinean” differed. Consistent with the answers obtained in question 1, in question 2 only 13.9 % of the sample associated being Argentinean with culture or values, often mentioning “tradition”, “our culture”, or “a way of being” as definitions. These figures cast some doubts as to whether in large cities such as Buenos Aires people invariably associate “culture”, “people” and “tradition” with their national identity. Maybe urban dwellers perceive that a shared cultural component is not that essential in order to belong to the nation.

A larger number of respondents (17.8%) directly related being Argentinean with geography and location (“living here” or “being born here”). I will come back to this emphasis upon geography and location below.

A major difference between question 1 and question 2 was that in the latter a 45.3% majority answered things like “love”, “a feeling” and “pride” as a response of what “being Argentinean” meant. Respondents in this category used the words “sentiment”, “attachment”, “love”, and “allegiance” when defining “being Argentinean”. Compare with question no. 1 in which a smaller 15.5% used similar expressions of emotional attachment. Yet in this larger 45.3% group, respondents were splintered in terms of what these sentiments, love, and allegiances meant. Many declared love and allegiance toward “country”, “the nation” “our history” and “our land”. Within this 45.3% almost half (48%) declared feelings towards land and territory. The rest of this group was divided. Some spoke of “love of the constitution” the “laws of our country” “our history”, while others gave answers that spoke of allegiance toward “community” and “people” or “being united with others”.

Let us go back again to institutions. At least since the French Revolution nations have usually been conceived as nations of citizens and therefore attached to republican institutions. Latin America sprang from that

tradition. Yet, only 6.5% of interviewees associated “being Argentinean” with “respecting the laws of the nation”, “institutions”, or “the state” in general. This is consistent with the responses we obtained in question 1. It means that despite the efforts of the state and public institutions to create a national identity that associates the nation to the state and its bureaucracies, people still make a weak connection between “nation” and “being Argentinean” with public institutions.

Can this frail association between the concepts of “being Argentinean” and “nation” with institutions tell us anything about the connection between national identity and citizenship? Studying nationalism and citizenship Habermas affirmed that in Europe the meaning of the term *nation* “...has changed from designating a pre-political entity to something that was supposed to play a constitutive role in defining the political identity of the citizens within a democratic polity.”²⁹ He writes: “The nation of citizens does not derive its identity from some common ethnic and cultural properties, but rather from the praxis of citizens who actively exercise their civil rights.”³⁰ Habermas’ claims appear to be right about Buenos Aires in terms of the weak impact of culture. His emphasis upon the praxis of citizens in connection with nation, however, does not seem to apply to our survey data. The weak connection between national identity and institutions that we observe in Buenos Aires may mean that urban citizens feel that their civil rights are not an essential part of their national identity. One wonders, too, whether the explanation for this low ranking of institutions is to be found in a history of frustration and mistrust of government. By the late 1990s and especially in the early 2000s, the relations between citizens and government in Argentina were tense.³¹ At the time of writing, in spite of substantial increasing political participation on the part of the citizenry, still the relations between citizens and the state continue to be problematic.

²⁹ Habermas, Jürgen, “Citizenship and National Identity: Some Reflections on the Future of Europe”, in Dahbour, Omar, and Micheline Ishay, The Nationalism Reader, Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1995, p 334

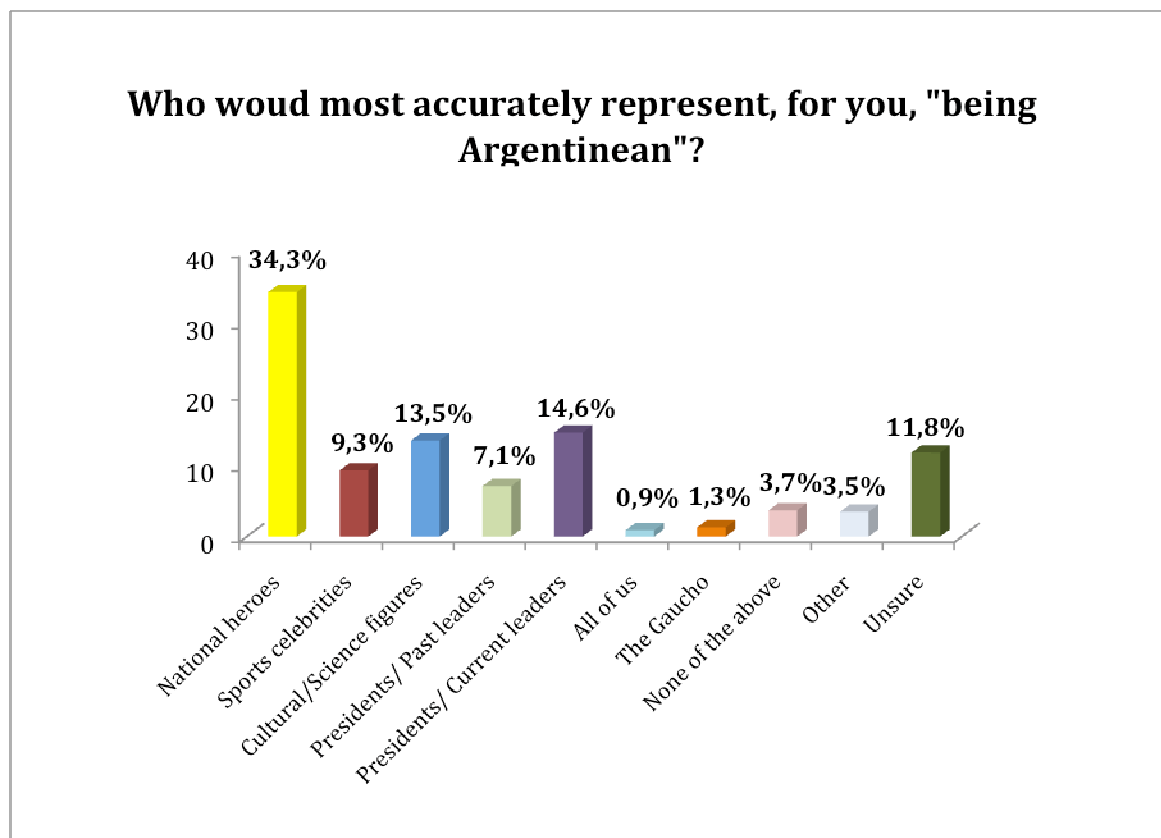
³⁰ Habermas, *ibid.*

³¹ Work done on Buenos Aires and other Latin American cities tends to confirm that both governments and state institutions are struggling to strengthen these linkages. The city of Buenos Aires, in particular, possesses a long history of mistrust in government. See Fernando Lopez-Alves, “Uncertainty, the Construction of the Future, and the Divorce Between Citizens and the State in Latin America”, in F. Lopez-Alves and Diane Johnson (ed.), Globalization and Uncertainty in Latin America, Palgrave/McMillan, 2007

Question no 3 encouraged even more concreteness by asking respondents to connect “being Argentinean” with specific individuals representing culture, history, science, the arts, sciences, sports, politics, and national history. This was an open question and it was to elicit linkages connecting an abstract concept (being Argentinean) with concrete human beings who, in the popular imaginary, could incarnate it.

Question 3: *“Quien representaria para usted mas fielmente el ser Argentino?” (Who would more accurately represent, for you, being Argentinean?)*

Figure 4 charts their responses.



Similar to prior questions, a significant percentage of the sample (11.8 %) declared not to be able to make a positive connection between any particular icon and popular personage with “being Argentinean”. We could add to this group those who said “nobody” (3.7%) and thus increase this number to 15.5% of the total sample. Perhaps because the poll was taken in

Buenos Aires the *Gaucha*, a popular figure associated with Argentine national history ranked quite low (1.3%).

A 13.5% of respondents picked diverse social and cultural icons that represented, for them, “our culture” or “our heritage”. This is consistent with prior questions in which culture and heritage were not favorite responses either. Figure 3 also shows that, unlike many observations that have been made about the importance of sports as definers of national identity and pride—especially soccer— only 9.3% of the sample associated sport stars with being Argentinean. One could assume that in special occasions such as world championships or similar events, this sentiment could vary. However, it seems safer to presuppose that, despite possible ups and downs, the association between sport icons or sport activities with “being Argentinean” would not widely vary over long periods of time.

Historical figures and founding fathers were picked by 34.3% of the sample. This obviously shows the influence of state policies targeted at associating identity with historical figures. It confirms that the writing and teaching of national history remains a key element of modern nation building.³² As it has long been suggested, schooling shapes national identity.³³ In light of our surveys, however, and in terms of the effectiveness of this nation-making tool, one can only talk about a relative rate of success, since less than half of the sample (34.3%) picked historical founding fathers. One could argue that those (7.1%) who selected “past presidents and leaders” were somehow making a similar connection. If we were to add their responses, we would reach a 41.4% of the sample, still less than half. Although this number is significant, it is also very significant that the rest of the sample did not connect being Argentinean with national icons and heroes.

Respondents made a relatively weak connection between being Argentinean and the current leadership (14.6%). A surprising result in this chart is that only 0.9% related “being Argentinean” with “all of us”, “everyone”, or “the people” in general. This adds to the weak relation that

³² There is plenty of literature on the subject. Among others, Hobsbawm, Eric J., “Inventing Tradition” in Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp 1-14. See as well Christopher L. (2008), *op.cit.*

³³ Argentine scholars have traditionally adhered to this argument. See for instance Carlos Escude *Patología del Nacionalismo: el caso Argentino*, and *El Fracaso del Proyecto Argentino: Educacion e ideologia*. Buenos Aires, Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Editorial Tesis, 1990 and 1991. For a comparative perspective, see Matthias Vom Hau, “Unpacking the School: Textbooks, Teachers, and the Construction of Nationhood in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru”, *Latin American Research Review*, 44: 3 (2009), pp. 127-154.

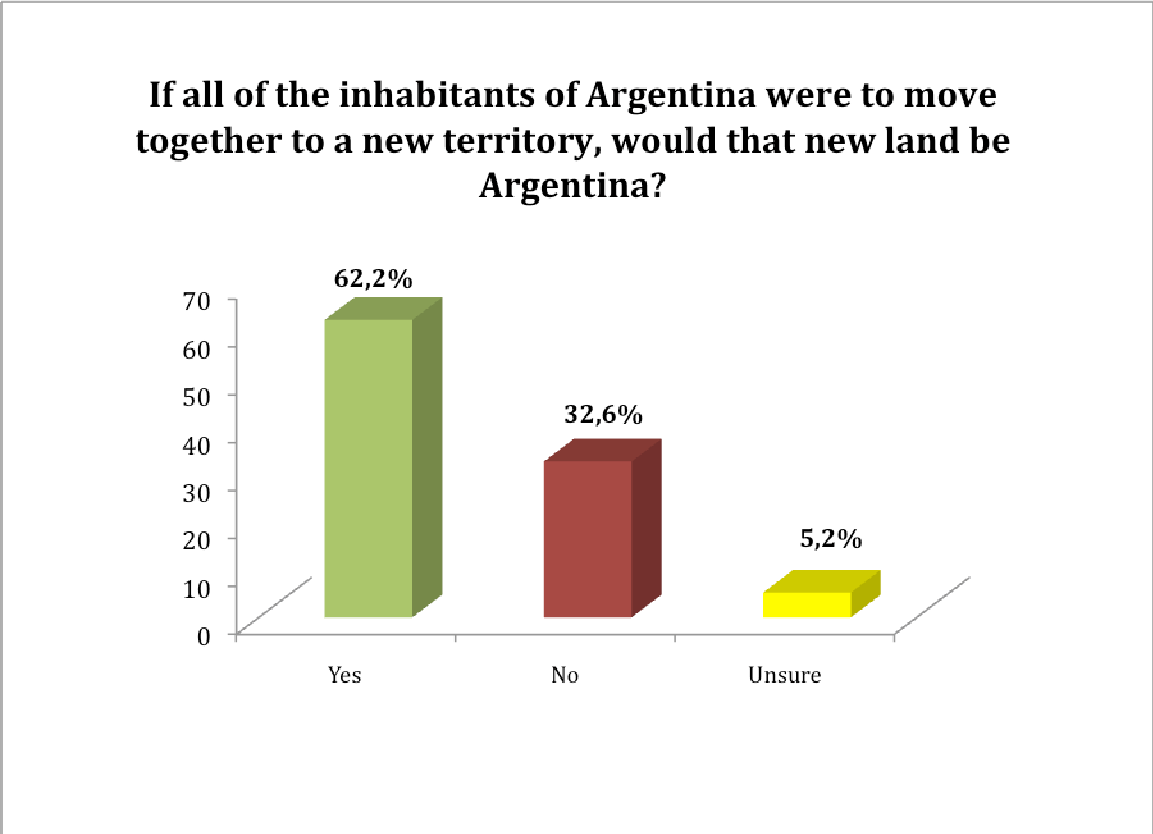
we already found in our prior questions between nation and community or people in general.

Let us now go back to the correlation between identity, community, and location. We tried to measure the importance of territory and geographical location in the imagining of the nation in question 4:

Question 4: *“Si todos los habitantes de la Argentina se mudaran juntos a un nuevo territorio, ese territorio seria Argentina?” (“If all the inhabitants of Argentina were to move to a new territory, would that new land be Argentina?”)*

I call this an “Exodus” question. Respondents were asked to think of Argentina as a new land that would embrace the entirety of its population. In other words, all Argentineans would live together but in a different territory. Therefore, Is Argentina wherever Argentineans reside? Could Argentineans transport “being Argentinean” to other geographical locations and bestow that quality to a new land? This is precisely what has been argued about immigrant communities and Diaspora populations around the globe. Yet what do members of the nation residing in Buenos Aires believe?

Figure no. 5

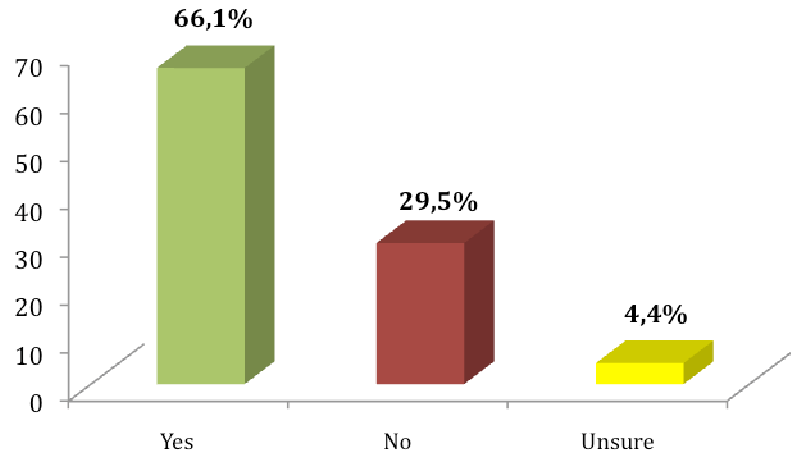


Unlike prior questions, only a small group (5.2%) responded declared not to know. A 32.6% responded in the negative, thus ranking territory higher than people; Argentina was therefore associated to the specific geographical territory in which respondents presently live. A majority of respondents (62.2%), however, responded that if all Argentineans were to move to a different location that new land would be Argentina, clearly associating national identity with people and, perhaps, community. In conclusion, in question no. 4 the nation, as defined by Weber, Anderson, and many others did emerge, but only in 62.2 % of the sample. This notion competed with a sizable percentage of respondents who associated nation with territory.

This question (4) required thinking of all Argentineans, united as a community, abandoning the old land and settling in a new one. What if that community were to emigrate separately, and therefore live in new places around the world but not together? Would the idea of Argentina as a nation still exist? This is what we asked in question no. 5. *“Si todos los habitantes de la argentina se fueran a vivir a diferentes lugares alrededor del mundo, Argentina todavia existiria?”* If all Argentineans were to migrate and live in different places around the world, would Argentina still exist? Figure 6 charts their answers.

Figure No. 6

If all Argentineans were to migrate and live in different places around the world, would Argentina still exist?



Observe that in this question all the people of Argentina disperse and leave behind the actual territory to establish themselves in different places around the world. Therefore, neither the community nor the territory exists no longer. The question, thus, strips from the concept of “nation” what, according to current literature, are its two most fundamental components. The empirical anchors of the concept, therefore, are compromised and Argentina becomes an empty category, a concept with no particular empirical reference, neither in terms of community nor territory. 66.1% of the sample, however, believed that Argentina would still exist, associating Argentina with an abstract category. This 66.1% of the sample are not the same people who in the prior question responded in the affirmative, associating community with nation (62.2%). Nor did we find a strong overlap between those who answered that Argentina would still exist with those that in the prior question responded in the negative (32.6%). Therefore, we can conclude that only 29.5% associated the Argentine nation with land or community.

Conclusions

The short survey just discussed adds to the quest for the major forces that shape the popular imaginary of the nation. Further research needs to be done to provide clearer answers but it is apparent that without integrating the opinions and views of those who are the living members of the nation no study of the nation can be complete. Arguments that have defined the nation as a “community of sentiment”, a “religious community” or a “cultural community” have claimed that nations can exist independently from geographical location. However, more than 32% of our respondents clearly associated nation and their national identity with geographical location. These results might vary if we were to interrogate members of the Argentine nation living in a foreign soil. My suspicion, however, is that territory would rank even higher. As I pointed out, culture, ethnicity, and race did not explain the variations and splits that we detected in terms of the way people conceive their national identity and the nation. These tentative conclusions will have to be further tested by comparing Buenos Aires to other important urban centers in Latin America and elsewhere, but they indicate that the nation and national identity are shaped by variables that are not necessarily those that have been favored by current and past scholarly literature.