



# Ambivalent Argentina

## Nationalism, Exoticism, and Latin Americanism at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition

*Alvaro Fernández Bravo*

*The world at once present and absent which the spectacle makes visible is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived. The world of the commodity is thus shown for what it is, because its movement is identical to the estrangement of men among themselves and in relation to their global product.*

—Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

A rapid glance at the catalogs and official reports published to commemorate nineteenth-century universal exhibitions reveals few traces of Latin American participation in them. Despite the abundance of references to both European and North American pavilions, as well as to African and Asian delegations, Latin American nations are seldom mentioned in the books that celebrate world's fairs.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, international exhibitions, particularly those that took place in the last decades of the nineteenth century, were of significant relevance for Latin American governments, the elite that ruled their countries, and local public opinion. Expositions were a chance to promote interest in the region and to expose a new image of their nations. Newspapers and public debates brought the issue to the fore, and states invested heavily in the construction of national pavilions.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the perception of Latin America at the world's fairs appears divided and even contradictory. If we look at local sources such as newspapers, chronicles, and testimonies from Latin Americans, there is clearly a strong and recognizable presence of the region at the expositions, which were extremely significant for Latin American audiences and ruling classes. But if we look at the official catalogs and other sources that record the events in Europe, we find little or no trace of their

participation, evidence that Latin American pavilions held little relevance for official record keepers.

Why this indifference toward Latin American countries in reports of the fairs? How does one explain the virtual absence of records—photographs, monuments, objects—of Latin American pavilions in catalogs and books devoted to the exhibitions? Why did Latin America's presence at the universal exhibitions seem inconsequential and yet, simultaneously, generate tremendous interest domestically? This article will try to address these questions, focusing on the Argentine pavilion at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, world's fairs experienced enormous growth, fueled by imperial rivalries, free trade, and growing nationalism. Exhibitions took place mostly in Europe and the United States, but also in peripheral regions, like Australia or Argentina, which staged their own national and international fairs.<sup>3</sup> These exhibitions are significant, for, as they anticipate our own era of globalization, they offer considerable insight into the development of its features and, consequentially, into economic trends such as the rhetoric of free trade and protectionism, internationalism and national rivalry. Like today, objects, commodities, and cultures were displayed at the turn of the century with the purpose of portraying a "total" image of human progress. Presented as an inventory of the world, the exhibitions are comparable to the encyclopedias of their time, as they shared a similar all-encompassing aim, that of capturing the diversity and multiplicity of human culture. As did the encyclopedias, the exhibitions seemingly proclaimed to have an open ideology, but concealed an agenda of domination. In fact, it was one nation—and its incarnated values—that controlled the portrayal of every distinct nationality and culture, just as it was one language and one culture that exercised the cultural hegemony over the rest, organizing the content of the universe. The Paris Universal Exposition and the *British Encyclopedia* can be read, then, as expressions of the same process of categorization and distribution of knowledge in a context of nineteenth-century imperialism. Both involve fantasies of colonial domination and national hegemony. In the case of world's fairs, it is a city containing within it the entire world, "a city inside of the Great City," as Rubén Darío (1910) defined the Universal Exhibition of 1900.<sup>4</sup> In the case of the *Encyclopedia*, one book and one language purport to contain all of human achievement within them: every culture, race, and product of mankind.

The claim of one event's encompassing all of human achievement implies the aim to control and classify according to a single organizing principle. The dominant theme at the universal exhibitions was "universal progress," with European civilization as a prime example.<sup>5</sup> Thus, European imperial expansion could be presented as a universal function of civilization and modernization, and, equally, the resistance of other cultures was seen not as a struggle between particular cultures and identities but rather as the epochal struggle between universalism and particularism (Laclau 1996, 50).<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, I aim to study the status of Latin American nations within this process of universal classification and in the struggle to establish national and regional identities in a context of incipient nationalization, where *nation* became the dominant symbolic unit.<sup>7</sup> In addition, I also investigate the conversion of natural resources into marketable commodities, which in turn came to symbolize these Latin American nations.<sup>8</sup> In specific terms, this research studies how coffee and meat became national icons of Brazil and Argentina.

As Tenorio-Trillo (1996, 64–95) demonstrates in the Mexican case, there was intense pressure from the French officials to construct the Mexican pavilion in an "exotic" style, with Orientalist features. Its construction involved Mexican anthropologists and architects, and the ethnographic collections of Paris museums were employed as models for the building's design. This procedure was not exclusive to Mexico—the other Latin American delegations encountered similar negotiations regarding their national pavilions.

Latin America occupied an ambiguous position in the imperial world at the *fin de siècle*: the countries were not considered proper nations *per se*, yet they weren't colonies either. They were invited to participate as sovereign nations, but their position was not equal to that of the European countries. Olga Vitali (1987, 31) notes that

the organizers of the 1889 Exhibition suggested to the countries of Central and South America that they display their products in a single pavilion, as they had done in 1878. But the Argentine delegation opposed this idea, and requested a space of 6,000 square meters; the French committee, however, assigned a mere 1,600 square meters space behind the Tour Eiffel (whose construction was in its early days), in a place named the Champ de Mars, on the banks of the Seine and close to the Pont d'Iéna.

This area was assigned to Latin American pavilions and African colonies.

The proposed location of the Argentine pavilion within the Latin American complex displeased the Argentine delegation, presided over by Antonio C. Cambaceres—brother of the writer Eugenio Cambaceres—and it was duly rejected. Argentina's status in the Latin American continent had always been ambivalent, and these exhibitions allowed for the Latin American vision of Argentina to be more explicitly explored.

For this reason, it is important to remember that the fairs were opportunities for the legitimization of national symbols. Prizes for different categories were awarded (among which science and education were the most important), and hierarchy among countries—a world order—was supposedly established. Nations were classified and qualified according to the objects that represented them, their level of technological development, and other scientific and economic norms.<sup>9</sup> Exhibitions, also known as fairs, were sites for trade and capital investment; science had a role in that exchange, as an instrument with which to advise potential investors about merchandise and market opportunities and to display progress and civilization, but also backwardness and barbarism. These latter were probably just as important in the “world progress” the exhibitions claimed to portray. However, the metropolis's behavior was arguably more “barbaric” since they used their colonies, which were unable to represent themselves, as a basis to display their own “evolution.” Thus, the barbarism of one nation served to emphasize the civilized qualities of another. Everything at the exposition was, in a way, fantastic: a stage where “palms, pumps and pistons were displayed in a fantasy world that entered the imagination of an entire generation of Europeans” (Buck-Morss 1991, 85). Exhibitions clearly share the symbolic economy of collections: both assign value from an internal relation established among their components (Stewart 1993, 154–57). Indeed, nations could expose their most valued features and were judged according to the objects exhibited in their national pavilions. These objects functioned as metonyms of their cultures: an aboriginal mask, for instance, represented a primitive culture; it was a matter of “cutting objects out of specific contexts and making them ‘stand for’ abstract wholes” (Clifford 1988, 220). In the case of Latin American nations these representations should be read within an environment characterized by fierce competition between countries to attract foreign investment and immigration. An article published in *La*

*prensa*, a Buenos Aires newspaper, on 3 August 1887, may help to illustrate this perception:

The Paris Exhibition will be a gigantic struggle, the most notable and wide of the century, in which all fruits of intelligence and the Universe will take part. It will be a spiritual and material battle, with perhaps no antecedents, observed by the whole world attending with the purpose of judging what every people of the Earth is, what it possesses, and what it is able to accomplish in the development of civilization. . . . Before only the people of the United States were called “Americans”: today the name is shared by North and South Americans. Before, we were moving and hesitating entities, with no organization or consistency, the prey of chronic and bloody revolts. Today we have graduated to the status of any young nation, full of life, which can attract the benefits of both credit and immigration. Before, only the British had business in these regions: today capital and credit come from other nations, whose merchandise and capital are also attracted by our market.

Up to this point, the article has addressed the problem of Latin America’s location on the world map and the construction of an identity associated with “what every people possesses.” These *possessions*, a region’s raw materials, will eventually lure investment and differentiate South Americans from North Americans. Commodities represented nations, and human realization “slid from *being* into *having*” (Debord 1983, 17). But the article continues: in the second part of the quoted passage, the difference in identity appears not just between North and South America, but also within Latin America itself. Although the text translates a certain arrogance with respect to immigration, there is evidence of some apprehension and state policy that certainly involved rivalry, especially with Brazil, which also attracted European immigrants.<sup>10</sup>

This national impetus must be understood within competitive national representations between countries: to belong to the group relegated to a prenatal position, and up to a certain point, exotic, as the Latin American pavilion is defined by Vitali (1987), was to accept a qualification inferior to the one Argentina aspired to at the Paris exhibition. This effort to distinguish itself communicates Latin America’s desire to be considered as a grouping of nations, rather than under the more general term *region*.

Therefore, in the discussion about the location of Latin American pavilions at the 1889 exhibition, the definition of cultural identity lacks affirmative features. On the contrary, cultural identity is manifested by “a contrastive rather than a substantive property of certain things” (Appadurai 1996, 12). Argentina decided to define its identity in contrast to Latin America and even in contrast to the Hispanic heritage visible in the architectural design of many other Latin American pavilions. The Argentine pavilion was built entirely along French lines and motifs, as were the sculptures which featured agricultural motifs.<sup>11</sup> National identity was significantly redefined, in a move to minimize the Spanish tradition and avoid Spanish or colonial architecture as preferable options to the Indian or pre-Hispanic motives chosen by Mexico. Argentina thus rewrote its identity fiction and defined itself as a European country, attractive to immigration and with laws that upheld citizens’ rights.

There is, in consequence, an intense ambivalence regarding the Argentine position within the global context. On one hand, regional affiliations that could be seen as weak positions, similar to those of some African or Asian colonies, were rejected; on the other hand, Argentina made a voluntary affiliation with French and European culture. Argentina imagined itself as closer to Europe than to Spain, which was erased from its national iconography. This desire to attract the attention of European investors threateningly suggested an interest in being recolonized, not by a “second-class” metropolis—as Spain was then perceived—but by a first-class European colonial empire, such as France or Great Britain.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the position of the elite is ambiguous. While refusing to be classed among the “backward nations,” Argentina happily subscribed to the controversial values celebrated at the exhibitions.

In contrast to the Argentine perspective, which seemed to accentuate differences within Latin America, José Martí’s (1975) text about the exhibition comes from an intensely Latin Americanist position.<sup>13</sup> In an account like Martí’s, Latin American representations are put together as a political and cultural unit, and the exhibition as a whole is portrayed as a model of universal coexistence where rich and poor nations, powerful and weak, pay respect to each other. For Martí nevertheless, the French antimonarchic republicanism prevailed. Both his Latin Americanist interpretation and the apology for republican values must be related with Martí’s commitment to Cuban independence. In a way, what the text intends to defend is the right of every country to represent itself. Martí is

interested in the self-representation of independent states and in the egalitarian cohabitation—at a symbolic level—of all nations within the scenario of the exhibition. Latin American unity is part of an identity fiction to which Cuba belongs, but from which it is momentarily excluded.

Both in Martí's book and in the official Argentine position on the 1889 exhibition, Latin American unity seems an impossible or external totality. According to official documents, Argentina is a European country that has reinvented its history and heritage, and that now considers itself a nation with no past, whose identity has been constructed independently from the rest of Latin America. In the Argentine case, totality is defined by the contrast and cultural difference with which Latin America secures its identity. For Martí, the homogeneity of Latin America is not enough to create a cohesive whole: certain components were missing, and the drive to unite the countries was intended more to include those who weren't part of the collection even though they deserved to be. Cuba's absence from the exhibition condemns the Latin American whole to remain fictional.

### Merchandise Phantasmagorias

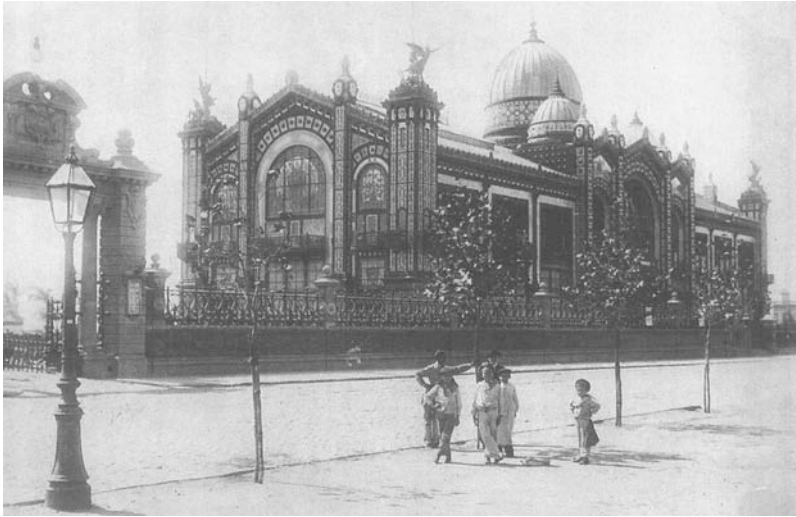
The exhibitions offered in their symbolic and iconographic density certain parallels with museums, and in fact, both the buildings constructed to house them and the collections were to become museums. A significant portion of the collection of the 1851 London Universal Exhibition, for instance, became part of what is today the Victoria and Albert Museum of London (Rydell and Gwinn 1994, 7; Barringer and Flynn 1998, 11–27). In other cases, national pavilions were conceived as museums and built with the purpose of being transported back to their original countries to be used as museums once the fair had ended.<sup>14</sup> That was just what happened to the Argentine pavilion at the 1889 Universal Exposition. It was shipped to Buenos Aires after the fair, and although part of it was lost during a storm, the building became the site for the National Museum of Fine Arts for several years (see figures 1 and 2). At least one Mexican pavilion at a North American fair was reassembled back in Mexico and used as a museum (Vitali 1987; Rydell 1984).<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, both the actual internal layout of the universal exhibitions and the way the collections were displayed mirrored those of a museum. In the same way, the universal exhibitions aimed to create cultural identities via these objects that represented greater totalities. A building or a specific product could be a reference to a bigger and more complex cultural unity of which it was a sample.

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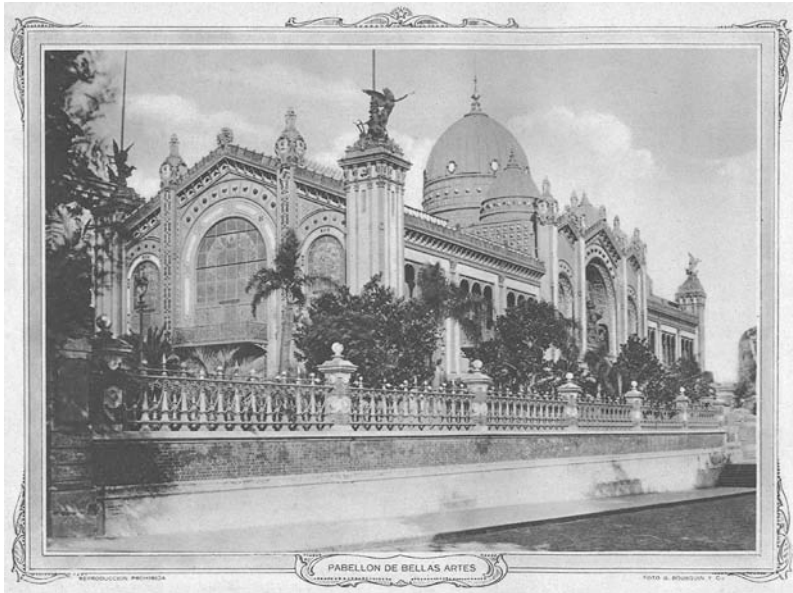
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*Figure 1. The Argentine Pavilion in Buenos Aires. View from Arenales Street (c. 1895). Source: Museum of the City of Buenos Aires.*

Nevertheless, the exhibitions present important differences with museums, at least with how they were conceived of during modernity. Indeed, despite the didactic mission that underlay the exhibition of various cultures to the urban masses, it was still staged in a capitalist arena and was used for financial means. The commodities exhibited were often associated with the nations of origin and became fetishes, that is, objects that acquired an ideological value linked with their representation. This representational value was primarily visual and, addressed to the massive audience gathered at exhibitions, always implied a fiction that I will call provisionally a fiction of state.

In contrast with the museum, the existence of objects with obvious economic value introduced the possibility of the exchange or purchase of these objects. “World’s fairs were showcases for the exhibition of whatever was demanded by the international market of commodities and ideas, a stage on which poor nations could exhibit everything from their raw materials to their native peoples and customs” (Tenorio-Trillo 1996, 8). Even if those objects were beyond the purchase power of the exhibition’s public, their scopic value generated a fantasy of consumption just by being observed. This is an example of what Marx (1978, 319–20) called the fetishism of commodities, when “materials furnished by Nature, . . . the form of wood



*Figure 2. The Argentine Pavilion in Buenos Aires, when it housed the National Museum of Fine Arts (c. 1900). Source: Museum of the City of Buenos Aires.*

for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. . . . But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent.”

Commodities become fetishes in the same way that objects acquire cultural properties when placed in a museum. In both cases, as Walter Benjamin (1999, 181) notes, a commodity “cut off from the will of man, aligns itself in a mysterious hierarchy, develops or declines exchangeability and, in accordance with its own peculiar laws, performs as an actor on a phantom stage.” The numerous intangible qualities an object assumes in a museum—value, price, cultural connotations—lend it a powerful ability to call forth cultural images. The “mysterious hierarchy” referred to by Benjamin could be identified in the imperial and national context of exhibitions.

Although the exhibitions began as celebrations of free trade and universality, during the second half of the nineteenth century heightened rivalry among colonial empires and nations meant that the hundreds of machines, inventions, substances, and objects displayed at the exhibitions were frequently allocated under national categories, among increasingly competitive countries. Thus came into being what Fernando Coronil (1997,

32) calls “the conception of the nation as the fundamental unit of analysis and of national wealth as being represented by commodities.” This meant the consolidation of a system that classified cultures by nations, and where every nation had to be represented by a state recognizable by symbolic assets, which included flags and national anthems as well as local products—commodities. A nation’s wealth thus became intrinsically linked to its particular produce. Consequentially, the objects exhibited in world’s fairs, even those not directly displayed with a price tag or only shown to present a cultural issue (e.g., the “African” village), became marketable commodities with an exchange value.<sup>16</sup> These commodities were there to be bought and sold, while representing at the same time the nation of origin.

It is significant that, as Benjamin claimed, the moral and political values celebrated at the exhibitions—free trade, liberty, equality, and fraternity as commemorated in 1889—were frequently misconstrued or parodied in their ultimate performance (Buck-Morss 1991). Free trade became protectionism, an obvious manifestation of the colonial policies of the European empires. National hierarchies, among the advanced and backward, “civilized” and “barbaric” nations, usurped equality. Thus the colonial possessions displayed by each metropolis supported the theory of economic dependency and equally revealed colonial management of national identities.<sup>17</sup> Expositions thus emerge as laboratories where national iconography was formulated according to regional appropriations and continental affiliations. Latin American nations ought to have defined their own identities, rewriting national legends, reinventing their history, and looking for concrete forms of self-representation. In some cases, the fairs were a sort of laboratory where different commodities were tested to see what, as national symbols, would hold more appeal for the world market.

A closer examination of the pavilions permits us to delve into the specific study of these commodities and their physical layout at the world’s fairs. The question I would like to ask now relates to the commodities chosen to represent a nation. Why choose meat, wood, wheat, or rock, elegantly displayed in the museums of the Argentine pavilion, to represent the nation? What was “Argentine” (or Brazilian, Chilean, etc.) about a piece of wood or a natural resource—usually poorly fashioned—such as those exhibited in Latin American pavilions at the universal exhibitions? The raw materials chosen approximated the representation of both Argentina *and* the Latin American delegations from which the country hoped to detach itself. Hence, its fiction of state became problematic as, despite its

goal to “stand out among all other nations of South America,” Argentina’s representative objects differed little from those exhibited by its neighbors.

The complexity of commodities was pointed out by Marx (1978, 319–29; see also Pietz 1996). I am interested in analyzing the display organization and the very nature of the collections that figured at the pavilions. If we look at those collections, we see showcases displaying samples of national produce, similar to the “curio cabinets” that preceded museums’ exhibitions. In the case of the Argentine pavilion at the Universal Exposition of 1889, there were rocks, wood, and agricultural products as well as some processed products such as beer, food, and, particularly, refrigerated meat. The latter was key merchandise in the Argentine pavilion and even earned the attention of the *Bulletin officiel de l’exposition*. It is this product that would dominate Argentine exports to Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, defining political and economic alliances. Meatpacking houses would be one of the biggest employers of immigrant labor (Smith 1986).

Significantly absent from the Argentine commodities exhibited are traces of human culture. As Susan Pearce (1992, 110) points out, human manifestations took some time to enter into the symbolic universe of museums. Argentina’s pavilion, unlike the other Latin American national pavilions at the 1889 fair, lacked almost totally not only human representations but also more specifically traces of a local culture. From statues ornamenting the building—all of them works of French sculptors (Vitali 1987, 32)—to the food and drinks exhibited (such as Bieckert beer), the Argentine pavilion was completely devoid of features specific to the country represented.<sup>18</sup> Equally, there are no references to local culture or to Latin America, in contrast with other pavilions such as that of Mexico or Brazil, which exhibited, along with their raw materials, evidence of their indigenous cultures, such as Indian objects, pre-Hispanic works of art, and architecture along aboriginal lines. In some cases, the pavilions themselves imitated pre-Hispanic architecture—such as the Aztec palace of the Mexican pavilion—or at least carried traces of human labor—such as the Bolivian pavilion (Martí 1975, 417–18; Tenorio-Trillo 1996, 64–80).

Equally significant is the absence of references to actual human involvement within the collections. Indeed, objects were decontextualized as “the collection replace[d] origin with classification” (Stewart 1993, 153). At the Argentine pavilion they appeared *ex nihilo*, with no trace of their acquisition—dynamics between the objects themselves became more important than their links with the original breeding ground. The exhibition

canceled out links with the past and situated itself in a universal empty time, where all ages and cultures were united and where both the Bronze Age and projections into the future could be explored in the same place.

This process of decontextualization at work in the transfer of objects from their “natural habitat” to the artificial setting of a museum collection leads us into a new narration. It emerges from the material culture exhibited in the Argentine pavilion, which revealed two things. The first was a weakened affiliation between Argentina and Latin America born out of the former’s rejection of the latter. This is apparent not only on a symbolic level, but also on a literal one: the Argentine pavilion had a specific site, devoid of any signs of local culture. It is important to specify that these choices often depended on marketing. In the case of Mexico, as we have seen, the emphasis on exotic features and Indian culture was part of a propaganda policy aimed at attracting investors; in the case of Argentina, immigration policy was the dominant element. Even the pamphlets printed for the occasion and handed out to visitors to the pavilion—prospective immigrants—underline the presence of the European communities already established in the pampas as a means to boost immigration.<sup>19</sup>

Second, this will to differentiate itself does not enable Argentina to render its collection substantially different from those of its neighbors: raw materials were dominant elements in all of the Latin American national representations. The absence of local cultural features in the Argentine pavilion can be interpreted as a strategy of propaganda aimed at attracting investors and immigrants, who might shy away from such samples of “exoticism” as native Indians.

Indians began to figure in Argentine painting during the nineteenth century when the so-called Indian problem was eliminated by the military campaigns in the second half of the century. General Roca’s “desert campaign” of 1879 culminated in the occupation of Patagonia and the killing of most of its indigenous inhabitants. There were, of course, previous representations, as Mauritz Rugendas’s work shows. However, these were not considered part of the national cultural patrimony, but rather the illustration by foreign artists of scenes and customs depicted in ambiguous locations (the frontier) similar to those of other countries, such as Chile.<sup>20</sup>

Angel Della Valle’s *La vuelta del malón* [The return of the Indian raid] (1892), provides interesting insight into the representation of Indians during the the nineteenth century. As Laura MaloSETTI Costa (1999) observes, this work marks the appearance of Indian-related themes in Argentina’s artistic patrimony—the threatening arrival of Indians in criollo

villages of the pampas. This painting generated considerable controversy when it was first exhibited in Buenos Aires; this reaction reflected the public sensitivity toward the issue. Nevertheless, the painting was selected to represent Argentina at the 1893 Chicago Universal Exhibition. As Malosetti Costa observes, “Desert [that is, pampas landscape], the gaucho, later the Indian, were to be assimilated, once they were no longer a danger, as part of a melancholic view toward a mythical past that becomes the symbolic image of national roots” (166). These images were to become part of the cultural patrimony during the 1893 Chicago exhibition. In 1889 at Paris, they were yet to emerge.

Despite the inherently fictional qualities of representation, the propaganda strategy of the 1889 exhibition can be considered successful at certain levels. In fact, both immigrants and investments were widely spread out over Argentine shores, and in a way, by favoring this destiny, they excluded others.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that the images projected at the pavilion were actually mirrored by the people they conjured up. It is representation that creates referent and not the other way around.

This does not mean that the construction of national iconography was a socially harmless process. On the contrary, the images are heavy with violence and exclusion. Domingo F. Sarmiento (1951, 310), in his opening speech at the Córdoba Exposition of 1871, put it in these terms: “I remember the painful memory of the disruption of general harmony. The *caudillos* [political leaders from the provinces] and the Exhibition of the products of work are like night and day, and never has it been more appropriate to say: *one will kill the other*.” Sarmiento paid homage to the “civilizing” function of the exhibitions, transforming scenery and customs into finished, marketable commodities, thus subduing chaotic Latin American nature into a more civilized, familiar order. Representation functioned here as a taming device over a reality that didn’t fit within a social structure, but that had to be and would be converted into objects, material culture, commodities. Representation was prerequisite to the adequate control of reality. Collection and control are usually parallel practices (Breckenridge 1989, 191).

Furthermore, the presence of commodities like food, rock, and wood can be seen as part of the colonial undertaking of the Argentine state recently constituted after a long period of civil wars and fitted accordingly with an aggressive policy of territorial expansion. The collections thus contained part of a process of “cultural constitution of the modern State” (Tausig 1996, 218). The objects exhibited were presented as available to all, with no signs of apparent ownership; material wealth seemed open to

exploration and food plentiful—a fertile land, ready for immigration, was thus depicted.<sup>22</sup> The exhibited objects had a representational value, which could even go beyond specific use-values or exchange-values.<sup>23</sup> The economic value of the merchandise exhibited in the pavilion was minimized, and instead these pieces were celebrated as objects of ethnographic interest or as objects of curiosity (an *Argentine* beer; a giant machine to refrigerate meat). Hence, the aforementioned desire to escape “exoticism” only served, on the contrary, to reinforce it. However, what made this Argentina exotic was not the Indian or non-European civilizations but the presence of modern objects and technologies in a peripheral region. Merchandise presents itself more as fetishes belonging to a generous and prodigal nature, waiting to be exploited. This was a signal addressed both to the investors, necessary to finance development, as well as to the immigrant labor force, necessary to sustain it.

The portrayal of the abundance of food and meat targeted a fin de siècle Europe plagued by malnutrition and a labor force in need of work. It is important to remark that this impoverished labor force represented the human surplus produced by industrialization and belonging to the lower layers of the social strata, often peasants: the very sector upon which the iconography of natural produce could perhaps exert a stronger pull. Furthermore, at the domestic level, such glorification elaborated one of Argentina’s preferred images of autoportrayal—a rich country, generous and “European.” It is important to underline the dual audience at which this national propaganda was aimed: the cosmopolitan audience but also a national audience affected by the press and, in the case of Argentina, by immigration (Europeans who eventually would settle and become Argentines). Was the image of the nation presented to the domestic and international publics the same? In many senses it was, as the observers in Europe frequently became citizens of the nation whose image was being projected. It is important to remember that by the end of the nineteenth century, almost half of Buenos Aires’s population was composed of foreigners, most of them Europeans. And it is precisely this immigrant public that was to be Argentinized, convinced of the nation’s wealth and abundance.

Ironically, this metaphor of abundance was largely generated by portrayals of widely available meat, although some years before the same sufficiency seemed grotesque to Sarmiento (1845) and Esteban Echeverría (1870) (the meat regime [*régimen carnífico*] Echeverría alludes to in *The Slaughterhouse*). The “barbaric” features were central to the symbolic representation of Argentina and could not be chased away even by the desire

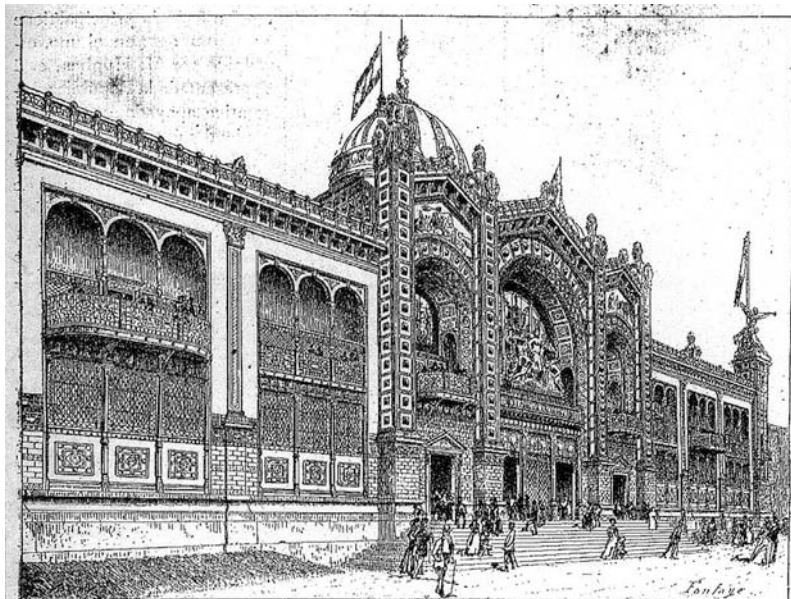
to minimize the more primal elements of the country that associated them with other “backward” nations. Yet the form of the product had changed. It was no longer the wild cattle abused and consumed by gauchos, away from capitalist civilization, a frontier economy that Sarmiento (1845) denounced in *Facundo*. Now the product had been transformed into a commodity and, thanks to modern techniques of refrigeration, could be exported to the European markets. Argentina was now part of the world market, and in Paris was born its fiction of state.<sup>24</sup>

Martí’s description of the Argentine pavilion eloquently relays the image projected by the exhibit (see figure 3), an image that allows us to discover what the collection evoked and its violent contrast with contemporary Argentina. Martí (1975, 417) described the impression like this:

A golden sun shines over the trees and the pavilions, it is the Argentine sun, set on top of the dome, white and blue like the country’s flag. . . . A statue marks at the door a map where the Republic is seen in relief, with the river where the ships full of people coming to work enters into the country, with the mountains that grow metals, and the extended pampas, covered with cattle. The model city of La Plata in relief appeared suddenly over the plains, with railroads and a port, and forty thousand inhabitants, and schools like palaces. And anything provided by the sheep and the ox is seen there, and everything that courageous men can do with beasts: a thousand leathers, wood, fabric, industries: the fresh meat in the freezing room; the horse manes, the animal horns, the bulbs of flowers, feathers, textiles.

Martí adds to the meaning of the collection, as his vision of Argentina was the very response its creators hoped to elicit: a country of prosperity and wealth, “with schools like palaces,” waiting to be populated. What escapes his notice, what is hidden by this phantasmagoria is the work needed to sustain such progress. That work would eventually be provided by immigrants in exchange for the goods offered by the state—education and food. This image also left out the owners of the land, the people who controlled the state and looked for workers and investors to multiply its agricultural production.<sup>25</sup>

One must wonder at the meaning of this national representation, alienated from its Latin American context, with no trace of vernacular culture. Can one envisage an iconography, a fiction of state different from



El Palacio de la República Argentina

## LOS PABELLONES DE LOS NUEVOS MUNDOS

### I

REPÚBLICAS HISPANO-AMERICANAS. — HAVAI, REPÚBLICA SUD-AFRICANA,  
COLONIA DEL CABO.

Las exposiciones particulares de dichos países, instaladas á todo coste en palacios grandiosos ó en preciosos pabellones, muestran toda la riqueza y el progresivo desarrollo de estos nuevos mundos.

A su cabeza figura el pabellón argentino, edificado por M. Ballu, y que, desarmado y trasportado á Buenos Aires, figurará allí en breve con el título de Palacio de las Exposiciones. Su ornamentación fastuosa y multicolor, en la que el hierro fundido y forjado está realzado con el brillo de los azulejos policromos, con el esplendor de los mosaicos y con los tornasolados reflejos de los cabujones de vidrios de colores, le da el carácter de una monstruosa joyería. Por la noche la electricidad enciende en sus cuatro fachadas novecientos puntos luminosos, y á semejanza de las piedras preciosas que destellan al ser heridas por las luces de una araña, los vidrios iluminados despiden reflejos encarnados verdes y azules de los múltiples adornos de sus calados balconajes.

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*Figure 3. Drawing of the Argentine Pavilion at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition. The building looks as Martí described it, with its dome in blue and white, the national colors of Argentina, and with Argentina's flag on the top. Source: Dumas, F. G., and L. de Fourcaud, eds., Revista de la Exposición Universal de París en 1889 (Barcelona: Montanery Simón, 1889), 513.*

that exhibited at the Argentine pavilion at the 1889 Universal Exposition? What additional local cultural customs or images could have served to represent the nation at the end of the nineteenth century? What consequences, surviving effects, and remainders of this image are present in the cultural patrimony?

In its international version, as I said, the image of a fountain of raw materials, mostly food, became the iconography of Argentina. On the other hand, it is interesting to read this representation as it was produced on the domestic stage, to which the pavilion was eventually shipped.<sup>26</sup> The exported image was of a wealthy, predominantly white, “European country” that, by the end of the century, was devoid of vernacular cultural marks (Indians or other dangers erased from the national territory), or whose ethnic traits were conveniently manipulated by the state (and its scientists). The potential threat of Latin American nature was thus defused and refined by the museums’ showcases.<sup>27</sup> The Spanish word for desert (*desierto*) is both a noun and a past participle. Desert, then, stood not as an “empty” territory but “emptied,” cleaned, and ready to welcome new subjects, envisaged by the Argentines as a Europe within America. This new people, nevertheless, is inscribed in an iconography that resembled fetishist representation of raw materials, the same representations that were adopted by the other Latin American nations from which Argentina intended, perhaps in vain, to distance itself.

I would like to conclude with a final reflection on the nature of national iconographies. As we have seen at the 1893 Chicago Exhibition, the images of the pampas, the Indians, and later the gauchos would come to represent Argentine identity. Perhaps in 1889 the images of violence and barbarism were too fresh in collective memory to be canonized.<sup>28</sup> At that time, two of the major museums that today house historical representations of Argentine cultural memory were still in the initial stages of construction. The National Historical Museum was founded in 1889, and the National Museum of Fine Arts, eventually settled at the repatriated 1889 Argentine Pavilion, was established by 1895. The representation of identity was still a blank canvas, ready to be furnished with new objects and commodities, on which national representation was going to be reified.

### Notes

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1. See, for example, Monod 1890; Thompson 1901; Allwood 1977; Friebe 1985; Burnham 1989; Aimondi 1990; and Burton 1991.
2. Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo (1996) maintains that Mexico and Argentina invested more in their pavilions than did the United States at the 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition. According to Alfred Picard (1891–92, 9: 360), Mexico spent 5 million francs, the largest sum among foreign nations, followed by Argentina, with 3.2 million francs, and the United States, with 1.125 million francs.
3. Argentina’s Rural Exposition at the turn of the century was the biggest of its type in the world. It remains today extremely influential on Argentina’s politics. Every year at the Rural Exposition, Argentina’s president addresses a public made up of cattlemen and landowners who may approve or disapprove national economic policies, seeking privileges and tax benefits. On Argentina’s nineteenth-century fairs, see Dosio 1998.
4. “Pero ya la ola repetida de este mar humano ha invadido las calles de esa ciudad fantástica que, florecida de torres, de cúpulas de oro, de flechas, erige su hermosura dentro de la gran ciudad” (Darío 1910, 21).
5. As general inventories of photographs, the exhibitions are comparable to the temporal inventory of historicism (Kracauer 1995, 61). Indeed, both establish parameters of teleological order and sequence according to which societies may also be observed simultaneously. Thus, just as an African village may illustrate the life of the “primitive” man, or the prehistoric era, a modern machine offers a vision of human future.
6. It is necessary to note that even among the European nations there were disagreements over the values celebrated at the expositions. As Tenorio-Trillo (1996) observes, France decided to commemorate the centenary of the French Revolution at the 1889 fair, and most European Courts resolved to boycott this controversial commemoration. As a consequence, no official delegations were sent. Brazil, at the time the only American nation with a monarchic regime—turning into a republic just when the exposition began—also stayed away (Turazzi 1995, 152), although its participation and Emperor Pedro II’s interest in the fair were significant (Schwarcz 1998, 385–407). The liberal elite of Spanish America apparently preferred not to get involved, although they did support, in theory at least, the republican principles celebrated at the exhibition. José Martí seems to have been seduced by the “interior” conception of the

nation (nation as emancipation; see Todorov 1991), no doubt because it was coherent with his own political project: Cuban independence. However, Lilia Schwarcz (1998) is mistaken when she claims that Brazilian participation at exhibitions had no parallel in Latin America.

7. The exhibitions also mark the rise of the nation-state to the political center stage. Certain authors maintain that this period is approaching its end, being replaced by other forms of localism. See Appadurai 1996 and Boswell 1999.
8. For studies on the nationalization of natural resources, see Coronil 1997 and Kaufmann and Zimmer 1998. One of the most thought-provoking of such studies is Fernando Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1978).
9. Some of the national institutions "exhibited" at the Argentine pavilion can be seen as miniature representations of the state itself, as evidence of the existence of institutions, laws, and other forms of civil society in this remote corner of the world, compatible with the so-called civilized world. The National Council of Education, which won several awards at the 1889 fair, was then one of the Argentine government's most prized institutions. I thank Eduardo Zimmermann for remarking on this point.
10. The priority assigned to immigration by Argentine embassies is clear in the 19 January 1889 letter of the director of the Argentine Office of Information and Propaganda to the Minister of Foreign Relations (Archive, box 23). National pavilions were a key part of the official strategy for the promotion of immigration to Argentina.
11. The Argentine pavilion was the project of the French architect Charles Ballu. It was inaugurated on 25 May 1889, and the ceremony was fronted by the French president Sadi Carnot and the Argentine vice president Carlos Pellegrini (Parise 1998).
12. The works of Manuel Ugarte, Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz, Juan José Hernández Arregui, and Jorge Abelardo Ramos are examples of Argentine anti-imperialist historiography that read the politics of the liberal elite as the creation of new colonial links, especially with Great Britain. See also José Luis Romero's (1987, 69) interpretation of this pact, not as the reestablishment of a colonial situation but as an effort to counterbalance the growing influence of the United States in Latin America.
13. Martí wrote *La edad de oro* as a children's book without having visited the exhibition. One chapter of the book, "La exposición de París," is a children's chronicle that depicts the fair almost as a theme park. The publication of the text as a children's book is interesting in that it considers these exhibitions in relation to fairy tales and fairylands, as did Walter Benjamin (Buck-Morss 1991, 83). The fact that Martí could and did write his text entirely from secondary

sources shows the relevance of the exhibition and its frequent appearance in Latin American newspapers and magazines at the time.

14. Certain public buildings in Buenos Aires, such as the Retiro and Constitución railway stations—built by the British—echo the splendor of universal exhibition pavilions such as London's Crystal Palace. I owe this observation to Rosa Aboy.
15. The relation between exhibitions and museums can be considered another way. The exhibitions anticipated some of the transformations museums were to undergo during the twentieth century, abandoning conservative and traditional positions to become a less hierarchical type of institution. Today some museums promote a more interactive and dynamic relation with their audience, as is the case of "please touch" museums. The exhibitions are also similar to museums in the way they have related to capitalism and consumer culture throughout the twentieth century. See Macdonald 1996 for the metamorphosis of the museum; for an analysis of the marketing conditions of museums and exhibitions see Rykwert 1998 and Hamon 1992.
16. Rydell (1984) notes the reluctance of the Mexican government to participate in the reproduction of the "Mexican" villages, often depicted as dirty and with a stereotypically "lazy" population. Instead, officials hoped to emphasize the existence of a submissive and cheap labor force, as a means of attracting foreign investment.
17. U.S. imperial policy was evident at the several exhibitions Latin American countries were invited to participate in. It consisted of an elaborate patronizing rhetoric of brotherhood, which echoes still today in a highly stylized "exoticism" destined to attract and repel the American public. See Rydell 1984, 89–93, 146–49.
18. Human beings often were exhibited at the pavilions, especially at those of the colonial units (see Rydell 1984 and Mitchell 1989). Benedict Burton (1991) maintains that in some exhibitions Patagonian Indians were exhibited, although Argentina, of course, never included any at its official pavilions. It is interesting to note the predominance of local populations in several pavilions. Mexico publicized the low cost and loyalty of its labor force while rejecting, unsuccessfully it would seem, attempts to ridicule Mexican customs at the exhibitions in the United States (Rydell 1984, 148). Argentina, on the other hand, pushed its fair legislation (from *République Argentine: La vie sociale et la vie légale des étrangers*, cited in Tenorio-Trillo 1996, 37) and good salaries in order to win over a qualified European labor force (Solberg 1970).
19. One of these pamphlets is *République Argentine* (quoted in Tenorio-Trillo 1996, 276).
20. See Munilla Lacasa 1999 for nineteenth-century Argentine painting; see Fernández Bravo 1999 on frontiers.

21. Tenorio-Trillo (1996, 37) notes this trend and contrasts it with events in Mexico. It is difficult to measure the real impact of the exhibitions on European immigration to Latin America; possibly, it was insignificant. However, the presence of immigration in the official policy of the Argentine government is fundamental, and so it is in the Argentine literature of the nineteenth century. The famous words of Juan B. Alberdi, “to govern is to populate,” canonized this position. John Kraniauskas (2000) provocatively rewrote them, with reference to the issue of the *desaparecidos* during the 1976–83 military dictatorship: “To govern is to depopulate and repopulate.”
22. For Michael Taussig (1996), fetishes and totems displayed were empty signifiers into which each observer could pour his or her own understanding. The meaning of the narration constructed in the collection wouldn’t be imposed by the curator, as Marta Dujovne (1995, 48–50) contends, but by the audience.
23. The category of representational value is taken from Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss 1991, 81.
24. Appadurai (1996, 3–63) studies the mobility of things to or from “commodity-hood” and the acquisition of value, determined by the possibility of exchange in the market. According to this position, meat only becomes a commodity thanks to refrigeration techniques, which then allow it to be exchanged for goods or services.
25. As Josefina Ludmer (1999) claimed, the Cambaceres family, of which the director of the Argentine delegation was a member, was part of a European landowning class that prospered during the Rosas period.
26. The Argentine pavilion was the site of the Centenary of Independence Exposition in 1910 in Buenos Aires. Afterward it housed the National Museum of Fine Arts until 1932. The pavilion was later disassembled, and some of its statues were relocated to several public buildings in Buenos Aires, where they remain today (Vitali 1987; Parise 1998).
27. Donna Haraway (1993) has studied the conservative function of museums. Haraway hints at a relationship between the naturalist, trying to preserve elements from a world threatened with extinction, and the taxidermist, who mummifies the biological specimens that he or she intends to preserve. Preservation can be compared with appropriation, domination, and the symbolic production of national iconographies.
28. The canonization of José Hernández’s *Martín Fierro* (1872), the gauchesque poem that became one of Argentina’s national symbols, was a parallel process. It continued well into the twentieth century, by which time it had reached the status of a national poem.

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