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## Book Review

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# Argentine nationalism panics Anglo-Americans

by Cynthia Rush

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### The Invention of Argentina

by Nicolas Shumway

University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991  
325 pages, hardbound, \$34.95

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A common thread running through many of the books written by U.S. academics about Argentina over the past two decades is a visceral hatred of the nationalist tradition which has caused so many problems for the foreign, particularly British, interests which attempted to dominate the country even prior to its independence from Spain.

Nicolas Shumway, a Spanish professor at Yale University is no exception to this in his book *The Invention of Argentina*. It purports to be a discussion of why Argentina has “failed as a nation,” a topic which the U.S. academic and Washington-based think-tank community never tires of analyzing, with almost always the same conclusions. In this work, Shumway asserts that the country’s problems stem from Argentina’s 19th-century intellectuals who, instead of pursuing a unifying national ideal based on “consensus and compromise,” devised what the author calls “guiding fictions” or opposing concepts of nationhood which could never be reconciled with each other. It is this “divisive mind-set” and “mythology of exclusion,” he says, which has prevented Argentina from becoming a successful nation today.

The “divisiveness” to which the Yale professor refers is the 19th-century battle between Argentine “liberals”—the overtly pro-British, pro-free trade backers of Adam Smith—and the proponents of a nationalist, protectionist school which identified the British in particular as the enemy and viewed Argentina as a potentially great nation capable of exerting both continental and international leadership. While Shumway tells the reader that he intends to objectively examine the “guiding fictions” representative of each of these groupings, and does provide significant historical detail on

both, he makes clear by the manner in which he presents his material that he much prefers the free traders.

He unhappily notes that Argentine nationalism “has a strong isolationist and protectionist current,” and that the arguments used by such late 19th-century protectionists as Vicente Fidel López and Carlos Pellegrini, who were influenced by the German-American economist Friedrich List, “still inform Argentine nationalism and are powerful currents in Peronism.” He also misses no opportunity to attack the Catholic Church and Argentina’s “reactionary” Spanish heritage, thus joining the chorus of “Black Legend” advocates which has become increasingly vociferous in this year of the 500th anniversary of the discovery and evangelization of America.

With the same racism and condescension displayed so often by many of his colleagues, Shumway portrays Ibero-American nationalist aspirations as nothing more than an oddball collection of conspiracy theories and delusions of grandeur, with “no stated doctrine, no creed, no program or platform.”

### Timed with assault on military

The timing of the book’s publication in late 1991 is not unimportant. Since taking office in July 1989, Argentine President Carlos Menem has waged a campaign to eradicate all vestiges of nationalism in his country, particularly within the Armed Forces, while applying the draconian free market and deregulation policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). That campaign intensified after Dec. 3, 1990, when nationalist military officers, led by Malvinas War hero Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, staged a rebellion against the Army chief of staff to demand an immediate change in the U.S.-dictated policy of destroying the institution of the Armed Forces.

Shumway’s assertion that Argentine nationalism has “no stated doctrine, no creed” is wishful thinking. Whether civilian or military, this phenomenon has always struck terror in the heart of the Anglo-American political establishment. Testimony to this fact during the 20th century are the extraordinary efforts made to discredit and overthrow the 1945-55 government of Gen. Juan Domingo Perón, whom Shumway describes with the typical epithet of “messianic demagogue.” In the last century, freemasonic factions allied with the grouping around Giuseppe Mazzini and advocates of British liberalism spent close to 30 years, beginning in 1827, trying to oust the pro-protectionist Juan Manuel de Rosas. They finally succeeded in imposing the 1853 Constitution committed to the British system of free trade.

Even the title of Shumway’s book, *The Invention of Argentina*, and his phrase “guiding fictions” are revealing. For him, the compelling issues which have motivated Argentine patriots for 200 years—opposition to free trade and British and foreign looting, identification with the other nations of Ibero-America, and the idea that the nation could aspire to

economic and political greatness—are simply not real. “The dark side of this nationalist vision of greatness is its obsession with conspiracy theories,” Shumway explains. “Nationalism readily admits Argentina’s ongoing failure to realize its destiny, but only by blaming ‘anti-national’ Argentines and their foreign masters who repeatedly thwart Argentina in realizing her spiritual destiny.”

### **Nationhood is a ‘fiction’**

Shumway thus reduces the real battles fought out in the 19th century to factional squabbling over competing “myths of nationhood” and “guiding fictions”—as if issues such as sovereignty or economic development were merely mythical. His insistence on this point is not unrelated to the fact that the same issues are being fought out today, throughout Ibero-America, as evidenced by the early-February events in Venezuela. His use of the term “guiding fictions” in fact is little more than a gimmick to attack nationalism while presenting the free trade faction as really not such bad fellows after all.

For example, he references a secret policy document written by Mariano Moreno, the British agent who served as secretary of the ruling body known as the Primera Junta which was set up in 1810 following the declaration of independence from Spain. The document was a mish-mash of proposals, including the call for a secret police to persecute political enemies, a strong state presence in the economy, and a foreign policy which invited Britain to take over lands previously owned by Spain. But Shumway insists that Moreno’s crazy plan “transmitted to Argentine discourse a concept of political evil still observable in many of Argentina’s ongoing guiding fictions.” This is the same racist drive peddled by analysts who claim that Argentines possess some genetic trait of authoritarianism which presumably explains the frequent periods of military takeover throughout the country’s history.

In the same vein, the professor laboriously insists that Moreno’s advocacy of repression and political terrorism has survived as a guiding fiction into the 20th century as reflected in the exaggerated use of the word *intransigent* in the country’s political lexicon. “The term *intransigente* . . . connotes principle, morality, and uncompromising defense of truth,” the author laments, “wherein compromise becomes sellout, and consensus becomes collaboration with enemies.” Behind the silly analogy to Moreno’s document is Shumway’s undisguised accusation that Argentina today is a failure because certain forces historically maintained a commitment to principles, morality, and truth rather than dealmaking and political expediency. No doubt he would hold up the abject submission to the IMF by Carlos Menem and other erstwhile Peronists as an excellent example of “compromise.”

Professor Shumway also gets to his other complaint, Argentina’s tradition of a strong state role in the economy, absurdly arguing that the existence of the “most overgov-

erned, overregulated economy in the capitalist world” can also be attributed to Moreno as well. “Government tampering with the economy has produced such a morass of regulations, industrial subsidies, job protection, labor rights, price supports, artificial exchange rates, state industries, and the like as to effectively paralyze the economy,” he charges. “The justification for such repeated intervention resonates Moreno’s desire to domesticate capitalism in the name of forced equality.”

### **Defending the Masonry**

Where the Yale professor most reveals his ideological bias, however, is in his discussion of the “Generation of ’37,” the Mazzinian faction which, in the name of civilization and “democracy,” imposed free trade and British liberalism on the country following the 1852 overthrow of the protectionist “barbarian” Juan Manuel de Rosas. The group’s two most prominent representatives, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Juan Bautista Alberdi, were unabashed in their defense of Adam Smith and in their vitriolic attacks on Argentina’s Spanish heritage, particularly on the role of the Catholic Church.

Shumway provides ample evidence of Alberdi and Sarmiento’s racism, seen in their plans to bring in representatives of Anglo-Saxon culture from northern Europe—not the darker-skinned peoples of *southern* Europe—who, they argued, could rapidly “civilize” the country. Their advocacy of the slogan “to govern is to populate” specifically meant encouraging immigration of the “energetic” and “practical” Anglo-Saxons who might cleanse the nation of its alleged Spanish tradition of laziness, absolutism, and reaction.

Yet Shumway apologizes for this group, explaining that “only the most blindly biased could deny that in the Men of ’37 there is much to praise. With inexhaustible energy they and their ideological successors diagnosed the ‘barbarism’ of their country, prescribed solutions, and did their best to hammer Argentina into a ‘civilized’ country they dreamed of.” In a contrived fashion, Shumway points to the Generation of ’37’s tendency to lobby for “drastic cures” to the nation’s problems, one he describes as almost a “national illness” in Argentina, to warn of what really frightens the Anglo-Americans: “the predisposition throughout modern Argentine history to accept radical changes, from military repression to democracy to messianic populism. . . . It has also made the Argentine economy the most experimented with and manipulated in the world.”

Shumway is right to be nervous, since “radical change” is on the agenda for Argentina, and for the rest of Ibero-America, which is fed up with IMF usury. The professor’s last sentence in the book admits this, albeit in his oblique academic jargon: “I can’t help sensing that the competing myths of nationhood bequeathed by the men who first invented Argentina remain a factor in the country’s frustrated quest for national realization.”