Chapter 3

Negotiating New Identities
Argentina of the Centennial

Acculturation versus Xenophobia: Manual del emigrante italiano

Fears about the loss of national identity and the idea that Argentines formed a distinctive ethnocultural group that was threatened by foreign influences were constant and pervasive themes of the cultural debates of the Argentine Centennial period. As Carlos Altamirano maintains, a moral crisis emerged at the time of the Centenario, which revolved around three principal themes: the racial constitution of the nation, the critique of materialism, and the level of participation in the political process.¹

Scholarly treatments of this period tend to emphasize the xenophobic nature of Argentine cultural nationalism. Rather than exclusively seeing the ideologies of this period as xenophobic reactions to foreign mobs, I suggest that possible strategies of including these others were just as prevalent. Rather than serving solely as a means of excluding the immigrant from the national community, Argentine cultural nationalism was also propelled by an integrationist impulse.² While by no means discounting the Argentine elite’s fear of social upheaval and its distaste for the working class immigrant, this line of interpretation seems only partly convincing. As I argue, cultural nationalism³ was not so much an attempt to reject the immigrant as it was a means of integrating the newcomer into

M. E. Bletz, Immigration and Acculturation in Brazil and Argentina 1890–1929
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the national community in a way that marginalized him politically. While deploring the newcomers as a threat to the collective race or character, cultural nationalists and their sympathizers accepted, albeit at times begrudgingly, that immigration was inevitable and believed that the incoming masses should be assimilated or “Argentinized” as completely as possible. If, during the early decades of the twentieth century, growing numbers of native Argentines began to understand their nation as a unique ethnocultural community and saw themselves as forming a distinctive race, what role did they envision for the millions of immigrants flooding their shores? Could the immigrant become a member of the Argentine race, and if so, how was this to be accomplished? The emergence of an ethnocultural understanding of “Argentine nationhood” coincided with, and indeed was in large part precipitated by, a massive influx of European immigrants.

One of the most important changes in Argentine thought, frequently overlooked, is the concept of nation itself. During much of the nineteenth century, liberal Argentines—inspired by France’s example—had understood their nation to be a political association, open to all who embraced a common political creed and worked for the welfare of the nation. By the opening decades of the twentieth century, however, a significant group of young intellectuals, known in Argentine historiography as cultural nationalists, began to espouse a vision of the nation that more closely resembled the ethnocultural conception of nationality. In this new interpretation, the Argentine nation became a “motherland,” or patria. This ethnocultural vision of the nation, rather than providing a rationale for marginalizing the foreigner, actually served as a means of integrating him. The emerging “raza argentina,” then, would include rather than exclude the immigrant masses, who should be in time assimilated or “Argentinized” as completely as possible.

Economically, immigrants proved quite successful, inserting themselves in a position above the unskilled Argentine masses but below the traditional landed elite. As studied by Samuel Baily, mutual aid societies became an important factor in organizing mainly Italian immigrant groups upon arrival.4 Most of these societies were founded during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and a number of large ones (with one thousand