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## Argentina and Great Britain: Studying an Asymmetrical Relationship through Domestic Material Culture

### ABSTRACT

For Argentina, and particularly Buenos Aires, no economic relations were more intense in the 19th century than those it maintained with Great Britain. Its whole industrial, trade, and financial structure depended on Britain, despite the fact that Argentina was not a colony, nor was there a British military force or a centralized institutional system to defend investments. The origins of this relationship can be traced to the events of the late 18th century, when consumer goods from Great Britain achieved absolute supremacy in Buenos Aires due to certain peculiarities in the city's history.

The material culture of Buenos Aires, from the opening of the port to foreign goods in the late 18th century, shows that over 90% of objects were imported, of which 50% came from Great Britain (Schávelzon 1999) (Figure 1). No similar data are available for other major Latin American cities, but experience suggests that there are no similar situations elsewhere. Nonetheless, it is not strange that this should have happened among the upper classes, connected to Western Europe by economic, political, or migratory ties. It would be the result of that relationship or of trying to show belonging or identity. But what can be observed from archaeology is that this was reproduced in all social strata, where consumption patterns may change, but the origins of the goods do not. In Buenos Aires and the

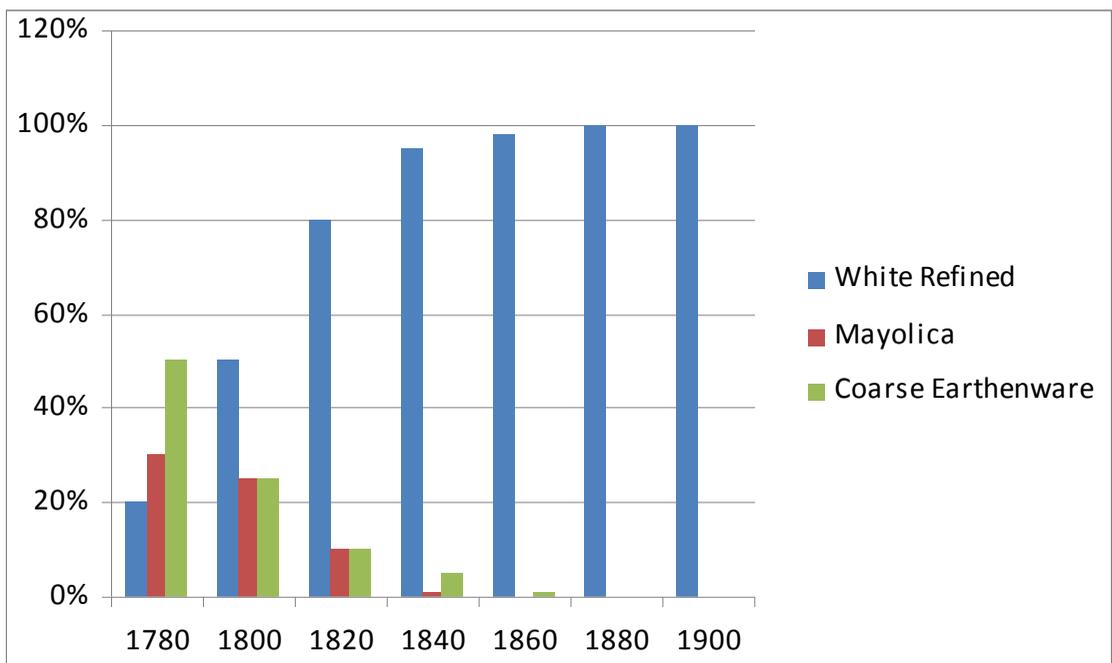


FIGURE 1. Relative percentages of white-refined (imported), majolica, and earthenware pottery from Buenos Aires archaeological sites (based on data from 56 Buenos Aires excavations). (Graph by author, 2012.)

surrounding area, ceramics were not produced until nearly 1900. It is open to discussion whether this was the cause of consumption or consequence of access to imported goods.

Excavating a 19th-century garbage pit in Buenos Aires means coming face to face with a universe of objects of foreign origin, in a proportion of up to 90%. And of that, the majority dating to after the mid-18th century is from Britain. This is an important potential area of study for archaeologists, and this asymmetrical relationship in the origin of material goods in Buenos Aires has also been observed by historians over the last century. At first, the emphasis was not on studying discarded objects but on analyzing the development of the economic system, the railways, shipping, ports, industry, landowning, meat-processing plants, telephony, banking, livestock farming, electricity, and much more.

This perception of the past meant that the interpretation of national history was divided into two opposing groups. On one side were those who saw an “imperialist dependence” beginning with the independence process, in what was called “Historical Revisionism,” although this was interpreted in various ways (Saldías 1883–1884; Rosa 1941–1942; Ramos 1949; Fitte 1962, 1965; Alen Lazcano 1963; Ortiz 1971). This imperialism, it was claimed, encouraged Argentine independence in order to gain overseas markets (Webster 1938; Kaufmann 1967; Lynch 1973; Street 1974). It is interesting that this issue has become popular again in Argentina, after having greatly influenced Marxist and social history and archaeology in the 1960s and 1970s. On the other side was the group of historians who viewed this process differently; some of them considered it something positive, interpreting it as a symbol of Argentina’s integration with the wider world, which in local terms meant being European. Buenos Aires has long called itself the Paris of South America (Scobie 1963). Others considered that for one country to influence the other to the point of determining its actions in a nonmilitary or force situation, at least two actors are required: one dominant and one allowing itself to be dominated, generally understood in the context of Argentina having no choice when consolidating its independence than to enter the orbit of one of the greatest contemporary external powers.

Thus it was established in the collective imagination of mid-19th-century Argentina that culture came from France, industry from Germany, farmhands from Spain and Italy, democratic ideas from the U.S., and manufactured goods from Britain (Figure 2). Obviously this was just a popular conception, but it became firmly rooted. This meant acceptance that industrial Britain brought goods to Argentina that were more valued for their price, aesthetic, design, quality, or ease of replacement, and that this was a positive thing, even if it destroyed the existing local labor-intensive artisan system. If it was also seen as a way of embracing the modern age is another question, but the destruction of national manufacturing and its replacement triggered great and bloody conflicts between the federal Argentinean states and the capital of Buenos Aires that devastated the former for more than the first half century after independence. If it were necessary to bathe the country in blood in order to construct a centralized, powerful national state, then that was what would be done (Burgin 1949).

A good example can be found in the early 19th century, when the national government decided to hand the operations of the Famatina gold mines to a British company whose shareholders included members of the Argentine national government. The local population believed that the mines belonged to the province, as part of the federal structure that had been adopted after independence. The conflict cast the country into a bloody 10-year civil war (Ortega Peña and Duhalde 1971). The great question was whether Argentina was to be a group of states united as one nation, or a nation formed by states organized by one great capital city. This was manifested in the question of whether to maintain a traditional manufacturing system or import foreign industry en masse (Figure 3).

### **Buenos Aires in the Imports Game**

Buenos Aires was founded in 1580 as a Spanish fort to protect the boundary with Portuguese Brazil and as a possible port and gateway to the interior of the continent. The age of the conquistadors was over, and it was clear which were the territories with riches produced by the indigenous population and with exploitable labor, and which were the marginal regions that could only produce goods through hard labor. Argentina was



FIGURE 2. The English landscape as an exotic view on everyday tableware in the Buenos Aires of the 19th century (Photo, C.A.U. Archives, 2010).

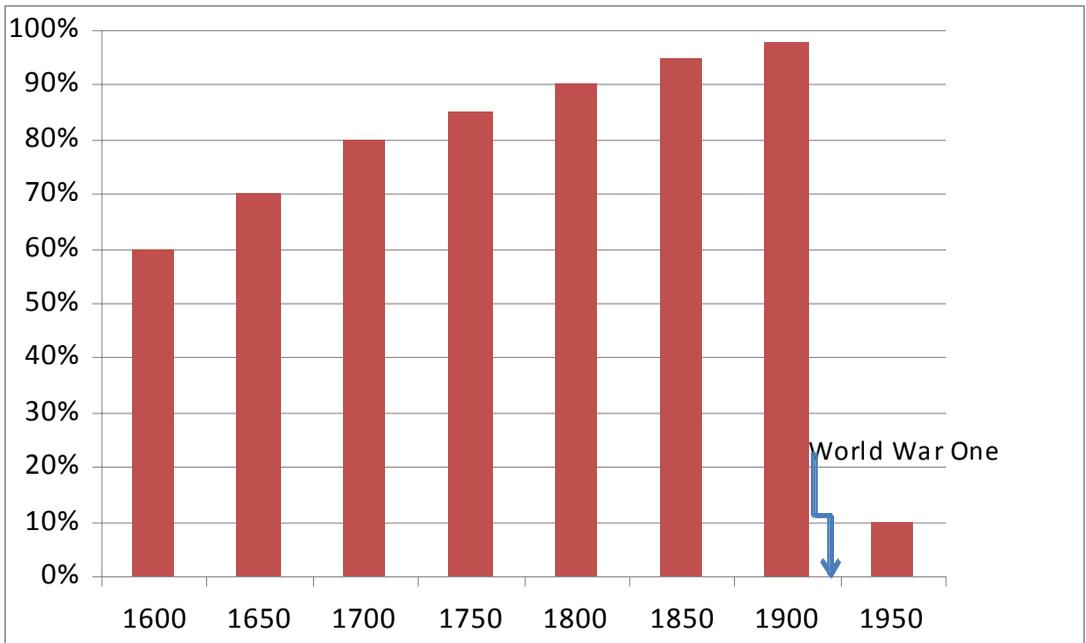


FIGURE 3. Percentage of Buenos Aires households featuring no locally produced pottery (data from 56 archaeological excavations). The systematic development of a national pottery industry began during World War I. (Graph by author, 2012.)

at the southern limit of the continent, and for a long time Buenos Aires would be the end of the world, as seen from the Atlantic or the Mediterranean, followed by the feared Straits of Magellan and then the Pacific Ocean. For those ships that circumnavigated the globe, Buenos Aires was the last real city and port of call, followed by an almost-empty wilderness until they reached Chile after a long and complex voyage to the Pacific via Tierra del Fuego.

Founded on the western bank of the great River Plate, a river wide as a sea but with fresh water, the city was well protected and almost inaccessible to pirates or other attacks. The geography of the port later changed, but until 1780 the port could only be accessed by highly experienced seamen in boats of shallow draft. Priority was given to maintaining an easily defended small port; boats would dock a mile offshore, and goods were transported to and around the city by small boats, horses, carts, and human labor. Nobody imagined that the traders' guilds of Lima (Peru) would manage to prohibit the port's operations and Buenos Aires would be left without a legal port. But the city was situated at a strategic location on the continent for lowering trade costs. The system imposed by Spain, whereby goods had to sail around the continent only for the goods to then travel back overland, was a political decision and one of economic subordination to prevent the accumulation of wealth in the colonies; it was quite absurd and led to Buenos Aires becoming a major informal port for smuggling (Goebel 1938; Christelow 1947; Villalobos 1974). Systems of dubious legality were established for this, systems of tricks and deceit, lies and obfuscation among complicit authorities, so that the city would become one of the greatest—illegal but real—slave ports of South America, and the entrance point for goods brought first from Spain, then the Netherlands and Portugal, and finally Britain. In the opposite direction silver was smuggled from the mines of Potosí (modern Bolivia) alongside local commodities, like leather, animal fat, and feathers. Argentina was exporting over one million cowhides annually in the 19th century. One can only imagine what this meant in terms of local meat consumption, although this is a matter for a different paper.

The late 18th century brought with it many far-reaching changes. The population grew exponentially (reaching 40,000 by 1800) and the physical structure of the city changed. Consumption grew,

and new markets and specialist shops were formed as trade exceeded the capacity of the main square. There were improvements like the Paseo de la Alameda, where the new bourgeoisie could take leisurely strolls as this social class grew alongside the increased trade. Streets were cobbled, lighting appeared, houses were numbered, wells with underground cisterns were used systematically for drinking water, and boardinghouses of not one-but two-floors high were built. A meat-curing industry began, and its produce was exported for the slave companies of Cuba and other countries. Around 1710–1720 the sale of city-owned common land surrounding the city was authorized to ease overcrowding. The church built large convents, boardinghouses, and larger and more luxurious houses for religious retreats. The possession of large amounts of silver, minted or otherwise, was something common to the most prominent families, and the use of slaves as urban servants reached exaggerated levels in terms of the number of slaves per household (Schávelzon 2003).

In terms of material goods, the late 18th century saw an invasion of manufactured products (Figure 4). On 29 June 1800, a church was opened in San Carlos de Maldonado, now Uruguay, but at the time known as the Eastern Bank of the River Plate and governed from Buenos Aires. Because of a lack of resources for decorating the exterior, such as tiles or stone ornamentation, English crockery was used instead. Pearlware plates and jugs with Willow-pattern motifs can still be seen in the towers. A parish that took six years to raise the money for the construction of a modest building had access to dozens of English plates for decorating the church.

With smuggling well established, new political reforms were introduced by Spain's new ruling Bourbon dynasty, including the opening up of trade in 1778—permission to use the port by and import of products from countries traditionally considered enemies (France and Britain, essentially). This wealth consolidated with the creation of the new Viceroyalty of the River Plate in 1777 with Buenos Aires as its capital, centralizing political power in the city. Buenos Aires saw itself as part of a world that was more cosmopolitan, modern, enlightened, looking to Europe. Already the relationship with the Andean world from pre-Columbian and early colonial times, whether with Lima as the capital of the viceroyalty or with the greater indigenous population, was



FIGURE 4. *La Pulpería* (The general store), with British and Dutch bottles; painting by Maurice Rugendas, ca. 1830. (Courtesy, C. A. U. Archives).

fading. Nevertheless, Argentine independence was signed in 1816 in the city of Tucumán, half way between the port and the Andes, between modernity and tradition, something that years earlier would have been unthinkable.

#### **At Home: Eating, Cooking, Serving**

How did these changes manifest themselves in terms of domestic material culture? Firstly, all cultural products, with the exception of ceramic construction materials, came from elsewhere, whether from the same territory and over a short distance—200 mi.—(ceramics from Santa Fe la Vieja), over a medium

distance—1,000 mi.— (timber from Paraguay), or overseas (the Mediterranean). There were of course local products, for construction, food, and cattle by-products such as leather, bone, and fat. Sometimes local residents also made delicate handicrafts or leisure items such as dice or cards; but everything else was imported to the city. It can be said with certainty that in the first 100 years there was a great presence of indigenous ceramics from the northern river region, much of it probably manufactured in the Spanish-built city of Santa Fe la Vieja. By the late 17th to early 18th century there was already a major presence of Spanish and Portuguese majolicas (Schávelzon 1991, 2001). There were also rare

cases of English slipware ceramics in this period. British subjects were present on many conquistador expeditions and foundings, and three of them were present at the founding of the city in 1580, but the British were reluctant to settle in the Spanish Empire. In the census of 1744 there were 7 British residents in a city of over 10,000 inhabitants. Hundreds of British sailors arrived in the ships, but they were part of a transient population that came and left quickly (Batolla 1928).

The presence of these visitors increased with the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, which brought an end to the war in Spain, and as a result of which Britain was able to create and send the South Sea Company to Buenos Aires with a monopoly on the slave trade (de Studer 1957), although Britain had always shown interest in South American markets and Buenos Aires for its South Atlantic naval strategy. Trade had previously been in the hands of France and Portugal, as Spain had been unable to fully engage with the slave trade due to internal problems. The South Sea Company was founded in 1715 and would not last long, although it would leave a permanent mark on the buildings and the collective memory of Buenos Aires (Schávelzon 2003). As the slave ships arrived, so too did occasional doctors and even beggars and tramps, who were viewed with surprise and even horror because of their religion. In 1748 there arrived two carpenters whom city hall took in due to a need for their services, while in 1778 others arrived to work in the salt plants, and other British residents also arrived sporadically. By 1804 there were 57 “ingleses” (10 were, in fact, American) in the city, including 10 women, 3 Scots, and 10 Irish. Again, aside from the South Sea Company’s short-lived presence, those who lied about their origins, and a few passing sailors, there were few permanent British immigrants.

In 1806, a British army temporarily captured Buenos Aires. The city of Colonia (across the River Plate in modern Uruguay) had already been attacked several times, but this was the first direct action against Buenos Aires itself. It is interesting that in the 45 days that the British governed the city, over 100 merchant ships entered the ports of Montevideo and Buenos Aires, and around 1,000 traders benefited from this brief period of open trade. The British were ultimately defeated, returning the following year with a formidable military expedition that once

again attacked the city. Despite the size of the invading army, it was defeated and forced to surrender. But this brought the whole population into contact with the goods that were arriving in unlimited quantities, separating politics from the commercial sphere (Roberts 1938) (Figure 3).

Furthermore, while the invasions failed in their military objective, they left the country with a group of British civilians who quickly became integrated into everyday life. In 1807 the British Commercial Rooms of Buenos Aires were set up, with a permanent base after independence. In 1822 the first bank formed exclusively from British interests was founded, even though in 1810 there were only 124 British residents in the city and region, albeit including a functioning agricultural colony. The military invasions brought goods worth £1 million in 100 ships to the port, and within two years over £1.3 million was entering the country annually (Cotrell 1975). The market was truly flooded with British objects. In 1824, Baring’s Bank infamously loaned £1 million to the Argentine state, which was the subject of controversial fatalities when the money was used for war with Brazil instead of the state’s original aim of national development (Ford 1956; Fite 1962; Scalabrini Ortiz 1962, 1971). In 1825, friendship and trade treaties were signed between Britain and Argentina, allowing for the free exercise of non-Catholic Christianity and officially marking the start of larger-scale British immigration, although this was beset by problems at first. By 1830 there were 4,000 British residents in Buenos Aires.

In the late 18th century there was a rapid transition from Spanish ceramics to English creamware crockery and glass bottles in material culture consumption. British ceramics dominated many international contexts in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and most readers of this journal are likely already familiar with the extensive North American literature on the archaeology of British ceramics in the United States and Canada. Australia (Brooks 2005) and South Africa (Klose and Malan 2000; Malan and Klose 2003) have also produced important studies, as have many other regions. The present study, however, focuses directly on the links between Britain and Buenos Aires. Spanish ceramics did not disappear from Buenos Aires completely, but a different glazed-pottery product began to appear, from Triana and later Alcora.

At the time most standardized Spanish ceramics came from Triana. But by the start of the 19th century, British creamware and pearlware had taken almost all the market, in all social strata, with just a few types of red earthenwares of mixed Mediterranean origin in distant second place in terms of quantity. Obviously trade was not only with Britain, Dutch bottles were a characteristic feature in domestic assemblages throughout the 19th century, even though there was hardly any trade with the Netherlands. British trade dominated. Empty and full beer bottles had been coming from Glasgow since 1820, with up to several million entering the country annually by 1900. The manufacturers sent them with the name of the local vendor, often with the Spanish misspelled. The fact that the earliest creamware is mixed with Spanish majolicas from Triana in similar proportions symbolizes the opposing political and ideological ideas prior to independence. All things British and French were symbols of liberty, not just luxury goods. Historical documents speak of the owners of these objects being brought before the law, not because they were smuggled but because they were from countries that were considered enemies.

The Wars of Independence (1810–1816) brought an abrupt change to this situation. Although it is difficult for archaeologists to state with any certainty in what year a plate was thrown away, excavations in Buenos Aires have allowed archaeologists to see the speed with which the market was captured by British goods, in the first instance crockery and knives. Glass came equally from Britain, France, and the Netherlands. British crockery with Chinese floral motifs, with increasingly common exotic motifs (for in Argentina British landscapes and Roman ruins were equally exotic), and with decorated, colored edges (shell-edge white refined pottery) covered the dining tables of Buenos Aires.

Arguably, this popularity of British ceramics was due to two reasons. Firstly, high-status families felt obliged to change the way they related with others and began to gather in their homes in a new space: the dining room, separated from the parlor. Having people to dinner was the new fashion, set apart from the traditional *tertulia* parlor debates, as a result of the freedom of the lower classes (especially slaves and freedmen) to circulate and use the public spaces, which forced aristocratic families to stay at home. There was

a clear change in the architecture in response to this new need, and this may have been reflected in the tableware, table manners, and the way in which food was served (Schávelzon 2000b) (Figure 5). Secondly, the color blue was coincidentally highly significant in the newly independent Argentina. The Argentine flag, created in 1811, was light blue (now sky blue) and white, hence the colors of Staffordshire crockery were symbolic of independence and liberty in the new state. Owning British transfer prints and shell-edge pottery therefore expressed anti-Spanish sentiment. It was an unusual coincidence, but what previously demonstrated liberality in buying imported goods now had a particularly symbolic connotation. In unplanned fashion, the consumption of certain crockery was favored over others, and blue on white became everyone's favorite. It should be remembered that several other national flags of the new American states shared this color scheme: Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Uruguay, and Costa Rica (and probably Cuba and Paraguay) were blue and white after the activities of the Franco-Argentine privateer Hipólito de Bouchard introduced the Argentine national colors to Central America (Figure 6).

The mass consumption of blue objects occurred not only with crockery but also with wall tiles. In Brazil these had garish colors—red, green, yellow, violet. But in Argentina the tiles covering churches, altars, kitchens, and courtyards were nearly all blue and white in the first half of the 19th century. Here the subjective local context of understanding cultural modes of thought and the impact of the local environment on cultural modes of thinking is important. While this is somewhat speculative, in considering the differences between these two color schemes the exuberant tropical stereotypes associated with Brazil cannot fail to be noted as compared to the River Plate way of life, which is stereotypically more conservative, melancholy, and subdued. On this point one might compare, for example, the 20th-century musical forms of an uplifting Brazilian samba to the more somber Argentine tango.

### **Immigration and Trade, Converging Paths**

Buenos Aires was a city of both internal and external immigration. This is how its history is commonly understood, this is how the past was



FIGURE 5. Photo of a young man selling a variety of portable goods, house to house, ca. 1880. (Courtesy, C. A. U. Archives).



FIGURE 6. British crockery or the Argentinean flag? Shell-edge whiteware from a well pit in San Telmo, central Buenos Aires. (Photo, C.A.U. Archives, 2012.)

institutionalized by the state and the national education system, and it is seen as a cornerstone feature of the city. The city's openness to the immigration of people from all over the world is an element of national pride established by the Argentine constitution from the very beginning. Of course, this is a popular conception, and the reality has complex subtleties. What actually happened and what people *think* happened are two different things, but as there was hardly any indigenous population in the city at the beginning of the colonial period, and what indigenous community did exist in Buenos Aires was rapidly exploited to extinction, the population of the province was seen historically as being composed solely of Spanish and locally born creoles of European descent; but this was an artificial construct accepted by traditional history because it fitted with the great political project of the 19th century. Africans accounted for one third of the population of Buenos Aires

1810, only to be wiped out over half a century of disease, wars in which they were used as cannon fodder, the end of the slave trade, and the demographic whitening of the rest of the population via a new wave of large-scale European immigration.

During the colonial period the Spanish-born residents of the city were a minority compared to the native-born creole European-descended population, itself comprised of a mix of ethnicities that tried to maintain its whiteness but was not always successful. Although the Spanish held all the power, they only accounted for less than 5% of the population. It is true that the caste system was not as rigid as elsewhere on the continent, due to the city's marginal position in the empire, and this gave the people of Buenos Aires certain liberties that were unthinkable in Lima or Mexico. Hence in the period prior to independence the population was made up of non-Spanish foreigners of diverse

origins: Portuguese, Spanish, Creoles, Africans, Afro-Argentineans, freedmen, and indigenous Argentineans. Each group had its rank, rights, and position in a nearly unmovable hierarchical society, with a material culture that identified the group, and to which it had access in a closed market that was cracked open by smuggling. Each had different degrees of symbolic appropriation and signification in the social “game” and used its universe of objects accordingly. This in turn impacted the use of British material culture in Buenos Aires. There were enormous differences between British objects to be used at a reception in a high-status home and a small African religious symbol etched on the base of an old plate, or a slave’s small pipe; but they all played a social role.

Independence, social equality, and the emancipation of slaves all led to an increase in the network of consumers, who were changing within a new capitalist but marginal society. With a lack of local production, the need to access new consumer products that did not come from Spain increased in line with the growth of the population (Tjaks and Vidaurreta 1964). Industrial Britain found the doors open to a market hungry for its products, especially low-cost ones. This led to the generation of a new social structure that meant the increase of consumer products, the reduction of import tariffs, and the Europeanization of social behavior, education, fashion, and the entry of immigrants (Pratt 1931; Ferns 1968; Platt 1968, 1972; Schávelzon 2000a).

In the latter case, Argentina did not follow the same political model as the rest of the continent, as its elite classes believed from early on in the 19th century that they should encourage an increase in the population and the “whitening” of the population in one fell swoop. To do this they chose to encourage the arrival of Europeans, supposed models of liberal, democratic, and industrial society. To populate was to encourage selective immigration, and this is what was done slowly until 1852, then en masse, utterly redefining the make-up of society for the next century.

Of the reforms that were carried out in the 1820s, all the governments regardless of their politics or economics agreed on the “Great National Project”: to encourage European immigration (understood as Western Europe and

occasionally Central Europe) while exterminating the indigenous people and making the Afro-Argentine population invisible. The “Generation of 1837” would set this out in writing as a national ideal, and from then on it would be fundamental to national thought. “Population is Civilization” was the paradigm that Juan B. Alberti would put forward and establish as policy.

In colonial times, immigration had been seen as a threat to the Spanish Crown, especially through the arrival of different religions. As has been discussed, in colonial times there had been an English-speaking population, as well as other foreigners, but it was limited and made up of atypical individuals who took advantage of city hall’s need for their professions. This would change in 1825 as the first three ships arriving from Great Britain were openly encouraged. Although the first immigrants were referred to as *English*, they were mostly Scottish and Welsh, and had frustrating experiences as Argentina was not fully prepared to receive them. This coincided with a mass exodus of workers from Britain and Ireland, as in the second half of the 19th century Europe encouraged nearly 50 million people to move to other territories. Many of those millions would make it to Argentina, transforming the country. And the attraction of a place without limits on land ownership—if they could compete with cattle ranchers—without having to serve in the military, no requirements on funding military activity, and with religious freedom was not to be sniffed at (Bailey 1953; Fitte 1967).

The data show the growth and transformation of the population as a result of mass immigration. In 1869 the city had a little over 180,000 inhabitants. By 1895 there would be 665,000, rising to 1.5 million by 1914. In the same period, the percentage of foreigners would go from 13% to nearly 43%. That is, almost half of the city was foreign-born. In 1913, of 8 million inhabitants in Argentina, 2 to 3 million were foreign, but only 28,000 were British (Graham-Yooll 1981). Between 1857 and 1957, 4.5 million immigrants arrived (Scobie 1963), but the British only accounted for 1% of the national population between 1850 and 1950, while in the same period Italians made up half of all immigrants, over 2 million people. And yet, in city excavations only on two occasions have plates of Italian origin with proof of Italian manufacture been found.

What does cultural material really represent in this context? Clearly it is not directly associated with immigration demographics. Over 50 excavations in Buenos Aires have shown the same: the initial dominance of Spanish tradition ceramics (16th and 17th centuries) and the subsequent replacement of the Spanish tradition by British ceramics (18th and 19th centuries), the latter in amounts often up to 99% of an assemblage. While the present discussion focuses solely on Buenos Aires, a similar replacement of Spanish-tradition materials with British materials can be seen both in other sites in Argentina (Chiavazza 2010) and elsewhere in South America (Brooks and Rodríguez 2012).

One might wonder whether there is a relationship between the origin of ceramic products imported since the 18th century and the number of immigrants, or their economic power, but this

is evidently not the case. It is true that the British community was able to do considerable brokerage business in the port, and its churches and schools had social standing from the early 19th century, but in terms of the number of people it did not make up a significant proportion of the population. The British did have their particularities, their unintegrated way of life, and like all communities they encouraged trade with their country of origin to access products that were part of their identities: wines, liquors, perfumes, cosmetics, all objects with names written in foreign languages on the labels, which from an archaeological point of view makes for a truly remarkable variety (Figure 7).

By the 1880s the construction of the state was complete, the war with the indigenous population had unified the modern territory of Argentina—but had also ended in near total



FIGURE 7. Rare but not exotic: "Turks and Ostriches" from a well pit in San Telmo, central Buenos Aires (Photo, C. A. U Archives, 2012.)

genocide—and the Afro-Argentinean population had been “whitened” through intermarriage with the influx of white settlers or simply exterminated. The new lands and the change from a livestock-based economy to a broader agriculture-based one and the new industries required a great injection of manual labor. Capitalism grew rapidly, albeit in a marginal and dependent global position (Figure 8). The example of the railways, constructed and controlled for a century by Britain, are the manifestation of this phenomenon (Wright 1977; Stones 1993).

There was thus defined a city where the inhabitants were mostly foreign, where no ties were formed with the past, nor a collective memory established, all managed by a social class in power that took no concern in economic interests for national development, only in its own. This would remain so until the 1910s, when social protest movements exploded, universal suffrage for men was achieved in 1916, and politics changed with the rise of the middle classes to power; but it is here that, for the purposes of this discussion, the archaeological history ends.

### The End of the Story

During the early 20th century, Argentinean intellectuals discovered, to their horror, the importance that Britain had had in the development of their country, and instead of understanding it they politicized it and used it, as history is always a justification for present actions. In all the exponential growth of the Argentinean state, Britain had played a central, double role. On the one hand the British had the knowledge and the industry to provide railways, electricity, the telegraph, the telephone, gas, and transportation infrastructure; they also had the capital to invest in these products. It was a matter of building systems of economic relations that would continue to promote this economic involvement, while also paying very high interest rates. But this was a double role; there were two sides to it. This was not the military imperialism that had attempted an armed conquest of the city in 1806 and 1807, but a more-sophisticated system that was fought with economic policies, not weapons. It has been written many times that the British community

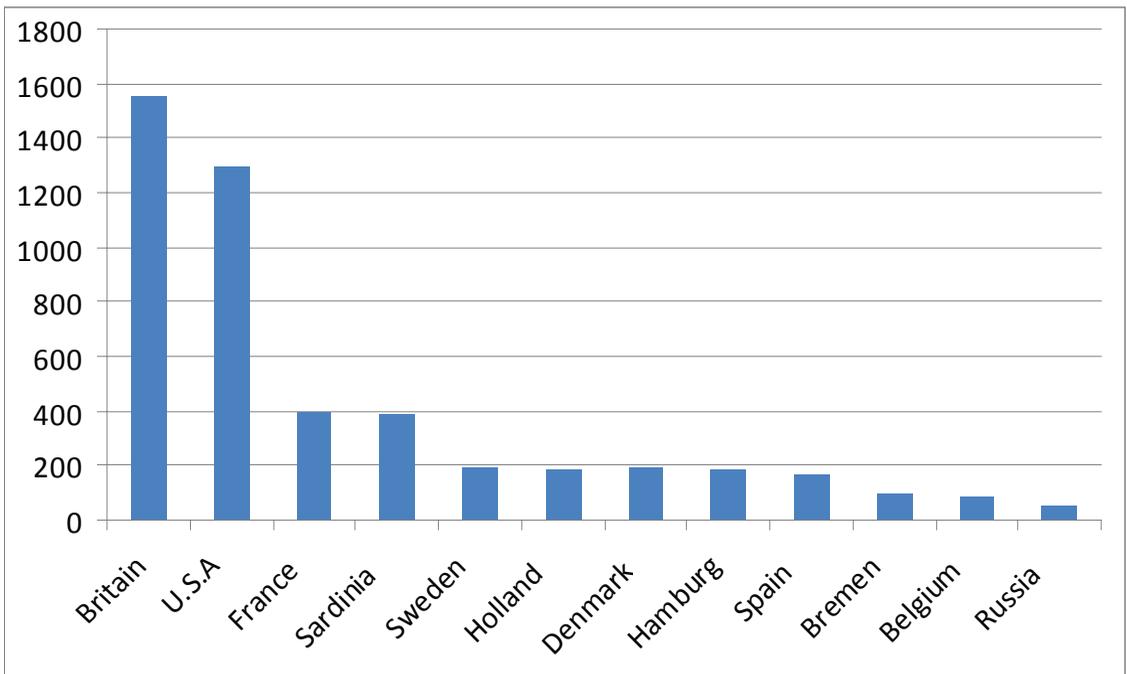


FIGURE 8. Cargos at Buenos Aires port during the years 1821–1842, excepting frontier traffic. (Graph by author, 2012.)

in Argentina was the strongest community of all the British Empire outside its own territories, and although it had neither military nor political dominance, or even an institutional structure that would bring together its interests, it was the country that absolutely dominated Argentinean trade for a century (Graham-Yooll 1981:11). Archaeological research on ceramics has shown that this occurred in other regions of the British Empire (Brooks 2005), even elsewhere in Latin America, but until now this research has been limited to the prominent families connected to independence and its ideology (Brooks and Rodríguez 2012). The case of Buenos Aires was quite different.

Since the 1820s loan applications had been made to the major British banks, loans which Argentina took over half a century to pay off, at great social cost, and often involving agreements that were not entirely transparent. But—to use a particularly Argentinean idiom—it takes two to tango. Historians are split between those who believe the loans were not necessary and were taken out only to generate profits for the banks, and those who consider that the nascent state and its reform of the Spanish colonial *ancien régime* could not be financed without money. They are irreconcilable positions because of their nationalist stance. The hypothesis of informal imperialism through trade was raised as an ideological banner and continues to be politically manipulated to this day, as it provides a simple explanation for the masses when the “bad guy” is foreign, when the enemy is from abroad.

The flood of British products into Argentina has therefore been understood simplistically, by both left- and right-wing ideologies, as the material correlation of British imperialism. It is true that there were no saints on either side of the story, that both Britain and Argentina’s ruling classes were complicit in the process, which is why others have seen this as the material manifestation of an inevitable “corruption” of Argentina; if Britain had not supplied the goods, then another country would have done so. Rarely was the possibility of independent nonglobalized development proposed, though it has been attributed to governments that never really embraced this position (Chiaromonte 1971). In fact, when a neighboring country, Paraguay, attempted to cut itself off from the globalized world in the mid-19th century, an alliance of South American countries with financial and material support from Britain destroyed Paraguay in the

War of the Triple Alliance (Pla 1976)—a conflict which wiped out more than half of Paraguay’s population, and up to 90% of the men. Under the circumstances, it is hardly a surprise that many felt that options were limited; that engagement with Britain was necessary.

## Conclusions

As was noted in the introduction, excavating a 19th-century garbage pit in Buenos Aires means coming face to face with a universe of objects of foreign origin, in a proportion of up to 90%. And of that, the best part after the mid-18th century is from Britain. There are many explanations, and history cannot construct a mechanical and simple view of social matters, though many attempt to do so. Aside from the consumption of material goods, there was a culture that consumed them—but also another that was not as interested in doing so. William Henry Hudson was a great ornithologist and writer born in Buenos Aires who decided to live and write in Britain. He wrote in 1885: “Man does not live on bread alone and the British occupation does not provide all that the heart desires. Blessings can become curses if the enormous power that grants them casts away from us the timid spirits of beauty and poetry” (Hudson 2005:311).

Adding, as a summary of his non-materialistic vision, romantic to the last, but of enormous humanity considering the importance of British business interests in the region: “May the plague of our superior civilization never fall on your wild flowers, may the yoke of our progress never befall your shepherds—carefree, kind, and lovers of music like the birds—to turn them into the forlorn and abject peasant of the Old World” (Hudson 2005:306).

This was not what had been written by the creator of the Argentine National Constitution of 1853, who lived in Europe and died in France: “Make the wastrel, the gaucho, the half-breed, the elemental unit of our popular masses pass through the transformations of the system of instruction; in a hundred years you will not make an English laborer of him, who works, consumes, lives decently and comfortably” (Alberdi 1886[3]:152).

These conflicting ideas, between the Anglo-Argentinean Hudson who extolled the innocence of an Argentinean peasantry free from the “plague” of British civilization, and Alberdi

who despaired at ever making the Argentinean “half-breed” the equal of an “English laborer,” lie at the heart of the paradoxes of later 18th- and 19th-century Buenos Aires. Archaeology, in this case, helps to reveal how the majority of the population during a period of more than a century decided to live, or at least helps to show how they would like to pretend they were living. What archaeology teaches is this: no matter what Hudson and Alberdi thought and wrote while extolling their opposing worldviews, in each of their houses the table was set with English ceramics.

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CENTRO DE ARQUEOLOGÍA URBANA

PABELLÓN 3

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