

Antonio Carbone
Park,
Tenement,
Slaughterhouse
Elite Imaginaries
of Buenos Aires,
1852–1880



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Antonio Carbone works as researcher at the German Historical Institute in Rome.

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Introduction

This book concerns the history of urban space in Buenos Aires and of a specific social group, whom I call liberal elites. More precisely, in this study I look at the interlocking between the production of space and the city's elites and, in order to do so, I primarily reconstruct urban imaginaries, namely the upper classes' perception, conception, and envisioning of their city. Temporally, this study focuses on the third quarter of the nineteenth century, a major turning point in the history of modern cities and of modern Argentina. Within this wider temporal frame, this study concentrates on a series of dramatic epidemics that shook the foundations of Buenos Aires. These epidemic outbreaks, which were interpreted by contemporaries as crises of the urban, deeply questioned and destabilized the structure of urban space, triggering a wide discussion and a partial reconfiguration of the city. The analysis of hygiene as the main contemporary means to understand and come to terms with the epidemic crises serves as a tool in this study to explore connections between space and elite desires, values, and ideologies. In fact, hygiene drew connections between disease, space, and disparate aspects of society and the environment. Three spaces, the slaughterhouses, the tenements, and the park of Palermo, found themselves under the special scrutiny of hygienists and elites. The banning of slaughterhouses, the reform of tenements, and the creation of the park promised to tackle the problem of disease while giving rise to new visions for a city that would prove more responsive to the desires of the elites. In this study, I regard these three spaces as sites in which the local, national, regional, and global intertwined, and analyze the conflicts and convergences that were engendered by the entanglement of these different scales.

The focus on space and the discussion about it in the wake of the epidemics guide the structure of this book. Therefore, each of its three chapters revolves around specific forms of space that occupied a central role in the wider debate on urban space connected with the epidemics. The first chapter of this study concentrates on the *saladeros*, a specific La Plata River vari-

ation of industrial slaughterhouses, mostly located in the southern part of the city. These polluting establishments processed livestock that came from the surrounding prairies and produced export goods for the Atlantic market. The alleged role of these factories as the cause of the epidemics generated a series of questions concerning the place of industry in Buenos Aires and the city's relations with both the surrounding countryside and the Atlantic market. Through the lens of the discussion about the *saladeros*, the chapter explores imaginaries concerning industry and the city's position in both a regional and global context. The second chapter concentrates on the *conventillos*, tenements that housed lower-class and mostly foreign-born residents. These densely inhabited houses were also suspected of being among the main causes of the epidemics and, due to their location in the center of Buenos Aires, which was also home to the city's upper-class *porteños*, as the inhabitants of the Argentine capital are called, provoked a discussion about the urban presence of workers, their housing, and more generally on relations between different classes. Finally, the third chapter analyzes the construction and first years of the park of Palermo, located on the northern outskirts of the city. The park emerged after the scourge of the epidemics as a solution that would make the city more salubrious and beautiful, and therefore prevent the outbreak of further epidemics. The chapter reconstructs how elite desires materialized in this space and explores the ways in which the park, as a liberal utopia, was viewed as the catalyst for a complete reconfiguration of the aesthetic appearance of the city, class relations, and Buenos Aires' connections with the countryside, the nation, and the world.

The temporal frame of this study roughly spans the years between 1852 and 1880. From a political historical perspective, the three decades analyzed in this study were pivotal for the final decision on the institutional status of the city of Buenos Aires within the Argentine nation. The discussion about the role of Buenos Aires as both national capital, and customs and commercial intermediary between the country's internal regions and the Atlantic market, had occupied Argentina since its *de facto* independence from Spain in 1810. Buenos Aires was, in fact, both the richest port city, enjoying lucrative far-reaching commercial relations, and the capital of the country's wealthiest and most populous province. The year 1852 marked the beginning of a new era, in which free-trade oriented elites came to power. The end of Juan Manuel de Rosas's authoritarian regime in 1852 resulted in the secession of Buenos Aires from the confederacy. From 1853, the Liberal Party of Buenos Aires, headed by Bartolomé Mitre, governed the city and its province with-

out any significant political opposition. In 1861, liberal *porteños* were able to expand their political hegemony to include the entire country and Bartolomé Mitre became President of a reunited Argentina. Despite being highly contested in the remaining provinces, this opened a period of *porteño* hegemony over the whole nation. The *porteño* power bloc around Mitre began to crumble over the difficulties accompanying the outbreak of the dramatic epidemics in Buenos Aires and the bloody Paraguayan War that pitted the allied armies of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay against Paraguayan forces between 1864 and 1870. Following these crises, Nicolás Avellaneda, a candidate unpopular among *porteños*, became president in 1874, a change that signaled the ultimate crises of Buenos Aires' liberals.¹ Throughout these years, even while functioning as *de facto* national and provincial capital, the status of Buenos Aires remained one of the main issues of conflict between *porteños* and the other Argentines. After a brief armed conflict in 1880, the rising power bloc around Avellaneda and Julio Roca concluded the era of *porteño* hegemony by imposing the federalization of the city of Buenos Aires, its port, and customs revenues. The city thus became the official capital of the nation but, in order to curb its overwhelming power, was severed from its rich province.

The decades analyzed in this work thus represent a crucial turning point in the political history of relations between Buenos Aires and the remaining provinces of Argentina. In the central years of these decades, between 1867 and 1871, a series of dramatic epidemics hit Buenos Aires. From 1867 to 1869, cholera plagued the city in recurring waves, killing people by the thousands. In 1871, just two years after the end of the cholera epidemics, yellow fever broke out, claiming the lives of almost 14,000 *porteños*.² Informed by the

1 As a general reference that sums up the variety of approaches in the Argentine historiography on this period, see the edited volume Marta Bonaudo, ed., *Nueva historia argentina, tomo 4: Liberalismo, estado y orden burgués (1852–1880)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1999).

2 For the main contributions to the history of epidemics in Buenos Aires, see Maximiliano Fiquelpron, *Morir en las grandes pestes: Las epidemias de cólera y fiebre amarilla en la Buenos Aires del siglo XIX* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2020); Diego Armus, *The Ailing City: Health, Tuberculosis, and Culture in Buenos Aires, 1870–1950* (Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 2011); Adriana Alvarez, *Entre muerte y mosquitos: El regreso de las plagas en la Argentina (siglos XIX y XX)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2010); Adrián Carbonetti, "Historia de una epidemia olvidada: La pandemia de gripe española en la Argentina, 1918–1919." *Desacatos*, no. 32 (2010); Adriana Alvarez, Irene Molinari and Daniel Reynoso, *Historias de enfermedades, salud y medicina en la Argentina de los siglos XIX–XX* (Mar del Plata: Editorial Universitaria de Mar del Plata, 2004); Diego Armus, "Tango, gender, and tuberculosis in Buenos Aires, 1900–1940," in *Disease in the History of Modern Latin America*, ed. Diego Armus (Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 2003); Diego Armus, "El descubrimiento de la enfermedad como problema social," in *Nueva historia argentina, tomo 5: El progreso, la modernización*

medical and hygienic theories of the time, urban elites largely interpreted these outbreaks as crises of the urban environment. The epidemics showed *porteño* elites that, while aspiring to control the whole nation, they struggled to manage the space and the population of their own city. Therefore, in addition to questions concerning the institutional status of the city, the fundamental structure of its space such as the width of its streets, the height and density of its buildings, the customs of its inhabitants, the presence of industry, the quality of its soils, and even the origin of its winds came under scrutiny.

In this study, I place a particular focus on the timeframe of the epidemics as the primary means to approach the question concerning the history of urban space and elites. In fact, contemporary knowledge viewed the epidemics as a quintessentially urban problem and the sense of urgency, doubts, and fears unleashed by the diseases spurred contemporaries to discuss fundamental elements of urban space and its connection to the city's everyday practices. Seminal studies in the social histories of cities such as those of Louis Chevalier, Richard Evans, and Frank Snowden all focus on epidemics as a heuristic and narrative tool to access the intricacies of urban history.³ In each of these investigations, the epidemics constitute a dense but spatio-temporally limited cross section, as crises that immediately questioned all aspects of urban life, which enables a formulation of narratives that bridge compartmentalization between social, cultural, economic, and environmental accounts. Inspired by these works, this study concentrates primarily

y sus límites (1880–1916), ed. Mirta Z. Lobato (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2000); Diego Armus, “Consenso, conflicto y liderazgo en la lucha contra la tuberculosis: Buenos Aires 1870–1950,” in *La cuestión social en Argentina, 1870–1943*, ed. Juan Suriano (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Colmena, 2000); Diego Armus, “Salud y anarquía: La tuberculosis en el discurso libertario argentino, 1870–1940,” in *Política, médicos y enfermedades: Lecturas de la historia de la salud en la Argentina*, ed. Mirta Z. Lobato and Adriana Alvarez (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1996). For monographies that specifically concentrate on the history of yellow fever and cholera in Buenos Aires, see Miguel Ángel Scenna, *Cuando murió Buenos Aires, 1871*, (Buenos Aires: Cántaro, 2009 [1974]); Héctor Recalde, *Las epidemias de cólera (1856–1895): Salud y sociedad en la Argentina oligárquica* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1993); Olga N. Bordi de Ragucci, *Cólera e inmigración, 1880–1900* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Leviatán, 1992).

- 3 See Frank M. Snowden, *Naples in the Time of Cholera, 1884–1911* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Richard J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years, 1830–1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Louis Chevalier, *Working Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: H. Fertig, 1973); Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Recently with a similar argument, see Cecilia M. Pascual, “The cholera epidemics as condenser of meaning: Urban cultures, clinical narratives, and hygiene policies in Rosario, Argentina, 1886–1887,” *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* 24, no. 2 (2017).

on the smaller timeframe of the epidemics between 1867 and 1871, while also delving into the preceding and following decades to track both the genealogy and progression of the imaginaries and processes under analysis.

Liberal Elites

Throughout this book, I use the term 'liberal' both to foster a global contextualization of Buenos Aires' elites and to ensure a clear periodization within Argentine history. In Buenos Aires, 'liberal' was principally a self-denomination of a group that initially organized around the Liberal Party.⁴ Since there was no substantial opposition to the liberals in Buenos Aires during the 1850s and the first part of the 1860s, the term does not designate a specific sector among the urban upper classes.⁵ However, the term 'liberal' is, firstly, important in distinguishing the elites that ruled between 1852 and 1880 from the previous power bloc supporting Juan Manuel de Rosas's authoritarian regime, as well as from the partially newly founded group that came to hold the reins of the so-called "conservative regime" after 1880.⁶ Secondly, the term 'liberal' facilitates the situating of Buenos Aires' elites within the broader European and American framework in which they saw themselves.⁷ In fact, if their liberalism was not always very strict in political terms—and one could arguably affirm that there is no such thing as strict liberalism—they certainly shared a liberal cultural horizon with other urban American and European bourgeois that comprised references to republicanism, free-market ideology, modernity, and individual freedom.

4 On the conceptual history of the words liberal and liberalism in the Plata region, see Wasserman, Fabio. "Liberal/Liberalismo." In Goldman, *Lenguaje y revolución*, 67–82.

5 See Tulio Halperín Donghi, "Argentina: Liberalism in a country born liberal," in *Guiding the Invisible Hand: Economic Liberalism and the State in Latin American History*, ed. Joseph L. Love and Nils Jacobsen (New York: Praeger, 1988).

6 See Natalio Botana, *El orden conservador: La política argentina entre 1880 y 1916*. (Buenos Aires: Hyspamérica, 1986).

7 On the link between Argentine and international liberalism, see Michael Goebel, *Argentina's Partisan Past: Nationalism and the Politics of History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011). As an example for a group of urban bourgeois in roughly the same period, see Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

As used in this study, the term 'elites' refers to the leading group of a complex alliance between different sections of society. *Porteño* liberal elites may not necessarily have had common economic interests or a sentiment of class belonging, but they did share similar political, moral, and aesthetic references. For instance, the prominent Argentine historian Tulio Halperín Donghi remarked that different social groups such as landowners and merchants converged in support of the liberal hegemony in Buenos Aires, despite their partially conflicted economic interests.⁸ In selecting the elites as the object of analysis, this book highlights a wider group of actors than the so-called 'generation of 1837,' as referred to in historiography. This last term has traditionally designated a handful of leading politicians and intellectuals who occupied key positions between 1852 and 1880 and shaped their liberal and romantic sensibility around the *Salón Literario*, which was founded in Buenos Aires in 1837.⁹ The idea of the 'generation of 1837' conjures up an image of a very limited group of intellectuals and politicians. This book instead looks beyond the circle of the 'generation of 1837' and also considers other pivotal figures in the production of space, such as hygienists, physicians, city officials, entrepreneurs, journalists, and artists. The term 'elites' therefore denotes a group that is broader and more complex than a small group of intellectual and political leaders but simultaneously conveys, as intended, a sense of both a numerically exiguous yet powerful group.¹⁰ Although both 'elite' and 'liberal' are unspecific terms to some extent, their lack of specificity makes them a perfect fit for the purpose of referring to a social group that had unstable boundaries and weak internal cohesion but that nevertheless shared a common though elusive frame of political, moral, and aesthetic references.

8 See Tulio Halperín Donghi, *La formación de la clase terrateniente bonaerense* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2005); Roy Hora, *The Landowners of the Argentine Pampas: A Social and Political History, 1860–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). See also, commenting on Halperín Donghi, Roy Hora, "Introducción: Una nación para el desierto argentino, algunas claves para su lectura," in Halperín Donghi; Hora, *Una nación para el desierto argentino*, 27.

9 See, for instance, Jorge Myers, "La revolución en las ideas: La generación romántica de 1837 en la cultura y en la política argentinas," in *Nueva historia argentina, tomo 3: Revolución, república, confederación (1806–1852)*, ed. Noemí Goldman (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1998); Natalio R. Botana, *La tradición republicana: Alberdi, Sarmiento y las ideas políticas de su tiempo* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1997). For a brief introduction in the subject, see Hilda Sabato, "Disputas políticas por la construcción de la república (1850–1880)," in *El pensamiento de Bartolomé Mitre y los liberales*, ed. Ricardo J. de Titto (Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 2009).

10 On the concept of the elite in the Latin American context, see Peter Waldmann, "Algunas observaciones y reflexiones críticas sobre el concepto de elite(s)," in *Elites en América Latina*, ed. Peter Birle (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2007).

Hygiene

If the conception of epidemics as crises that destabilized urban space is pivotal to this study, the history of hygiene is likewise an essential component of this book as it represents the primary contemporary means of understanding and responding to these crises. Before professionals in urban sociology, architecture, and urban planning appeared on the scene, hygienists were the main experts in the field of the urban.¹¹ In two of the three chapters of this study, hygiene represents the starting point of the analysis. By choosing hygiene as a central point of departure, I do not intend to suggest that hygiene was the cause of the fears concerning the epidemics and urban space; indeed, the number of fatalities was in itself sufficient to do so. Nevertheless, hygiene was the discipline from which contemporaries attempted to make sense of epidemics. On the one hand, hygiene reproduced deeply-rooted anxieties, while on the other hand it connected these concerns to the urban environment and reconfigured them in peculiar ways.

Four main aspects of the ability of hygienists to reconfigure preoccupations concerning urban space are especially relevant for this study. Firstly, from a heuristic perspective, hygiene provides a tool to reconstruct middle and upper-class desires and fears in their connection with space, materiality, and practice. As Bruno Latour has underlined, hygienists often conceived their scientific field as virtually unlimited and all-encompassing. They programmatically described and intervened in all possible aspects of life, on “food, urbanism, sexuality, education, the army” as well as on “air, light, heat, water, and the soil.”¹² Hygiene grouped and articulated every possible fear, desire, and expectation of bourgeois urbanites. These fears and hopes literally concerned life and death and thus also facilitate the reconstruction of arguments and rationales that “lay outside simple calculations of profit”—as Linda Nash states—and therefore offer an insight

11 As an example of this argument, see Sun-Young Park, *Ideals of the Body: Architecture, Urbanism, and Hygiene in Postrevolutionary Paris* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018); David Barnes, *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle Against Filth and Germs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Philipp Sarasin, *Reizbare Maschinen: Eine Geschichte des Körpers 1765–1914* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001); Martin Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Carla Giovannini, *Risanare le città: L'utopia igienista di fine Ottocento* (Milan: Franco Angeli Editore, 1996); Philip D. Curtin “Medical knowledge and urban planning in tropical Africa.” *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985).

12 Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 21.

into the moral economies of the urban middle and upper classes.¹³ Furthermore, the system of values associated with hygiene is not abstract but articulated in adherence to concrete environments, practices, and spaces. In other words, hygiene connected bourgeois moral economies with a sometimes prodigiously detailed system of prescriptions regarding bodies, space, practices, and morality. If hygiene analyzed and fragmented the world into a myriad of pieces, as Michel Foucault argued,¹⁴ it was also a tool of synthesis that grouped together the most disparate elements of society and the environment. The holistic epistemological system of hygiene connected health, morality, and aesthetics with matters such as the width of streets or the quantity and quality of air. Hygiene therefore represents the foundations from which to gain a greater understanding of the complex system of connections that formed the bedrock of the relationship between elite imaginaries and materiality.

Secondly, hygiene connected moral economies and aesthetic bourgeois taste to materiality in a peculiarly political way. Thus, hygiene was an articulated ideological system that formed part of what Bruno Latour calls the “scientific religion” of the second half of the nineteenth century. Hygiene thus created a largely coherent system that offered a version of reality and a pragmatic set of prescriptions, which in turn enabled not only the navigation of individual life but also fostered dreams of social reform. However, hygiene did not present itself explicitly as a belief system but rather as a system based on objectively and empirically proven facts. The betterment of society promised by hygiene rested on a scientific and objective basis and was therefore viewed as untainted by the factionalism of political interest or opinion. Hygiene differed from religion in the sense that its way of producing truth was not based on divine revelation but on an epistemological system that allegedly allowed nature to speak in its own right.¹⁵ It was therefore at once a political apparatus in that it constituted the basis for profound social reform, while ensuring that any such reform of society would be implemented on the basis of a scientific objectivity that denied its partiality. In summary, hygiene can therefore be seen as a political project that aimed to “eliminate political

13 Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 5.

14 See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Vintage books, 1975).

15 See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 55–113.

dispute” in the name of health, an allegedly objective value, and scientific reform.¹⁶

Thirdly, as part of the “scientific religion” that aspired to eliminate political dispute in the name of scientific truth, the multiple levels of convergence between hygiene and liberalism, as the broad political and cultural framework of the rising urban bourgeois of the second half of the nineteenth century, are particularly striking. Even though liberalism was a disparate agglomeration of ideologies, it possessed a defining core in presenting itself—as Simon Gunn argued—as a project of restoring nature. Resting on the idea of nature speaking in its own right, the scientific religion inscribed itself in economic and political liberalism that in turn presented itself as a ‘natural’ form of government. For instance, returning to the origins of liberalism, Adam Smith’s invisible hand ultimately rested on a concept of the market as a system that could regulate itself due to the natural laws which underpinned it; John Locke, the main theorist of liberal contractarianism, also imagined liberal society as a path to ensuring natural rights. As Simon Gunn and James Vernon have argued, liberalism “had its roots in the long eighteenth century but came of age during the nineteenth century and sought to ‘restore’ what was projected as a natural condition of liberty and freedom.”¹⁷ Hygiene encapsulates the ambivalence of liberalism that was both a project aimed at restoring the alleged natural freedom of humanity as well as a governmental system that sought to produce what Patrick Joyce called “the rule of freedom.”¹⁸

What is more, the promise of the “scientific religion” to eliminate political dispute through scientific objectivity corresponded to specific idiosyncrasies of the Argentine liberalism of the 1850s and 1860s. As Halperín Donghi reconstructs in his *Una nación para el desierto argentino*, Bartolomé Mitre, the leader of the *porteño* liberals, did not view his party as a representation of specific class interests. In fact, resting on an originally egalitarian declination of liberalism inscribed in the anti-ancien-régime revolution of 1810, Mitre refuted class-based interpretations of society. His liberal party attempted to oppose

16 Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 8.

17 Simon Gunn and James Vernon, “Introduction: What was liberal modernity and why was it peculiar in imperial Britain?,” in *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain*, ed. Simon Gunn and James Vernon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 9.

18 See Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2003); Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Nikolas S. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

the violence and factionalism that characterized Argentine society and politics with a project that held the utopia of eliminating and overcoming political strife as one of its core values. As Halperín Donghi argued, the superiority that liberals assigned to their position “did not derive from the pretension of faithfully representing a social reality in the political field [...] but rather, on the contrary, from the pretension of identifying with a system of valid ideas [...]”.¹⁹ Mitre and the *porteño* liberals did not regard their position as the political articulation of their socially situated vision of society but as a project based on truthful and universal ideas. In a similar way as was the case in Britain regarding the relationship between liberalism and imperialism, as Uday Singh Mehta argues, liberal universalism was deeply connected with the idea of an unquestionable civilizing mission,²⁰ which in the Argentine case was articulated in the form of an imagined patronizing relationship between the enlightened liberal elites vis-à-vis the other layers of society. This study shows that while this project intended to ‘civilize’ Argentine politics by overcoming factionalism and political violence, it in fact resulted in a systematic de-legitimization of political opponents that finally produced deep fractures within society. The link between liberalism and science, which regarded the political as a field for the implementation of universally “valid ideas,” was not exclusive to hygiene. In fact, further scientific fields could provide the allegedly “valid ideas” that the liberals strove for. However, the specifically holistic nature of hygiene, which enabled all aspects of material, moral, and aesthetic life to be packaged together under the guise of science and in turn to produce direct linkages between socially situated imaginaries and materiality, grants it a crucial position in an investigation of the history of urban space.

19 “[la] superioridad [del liberalismo] no derivaba de ninguna pretensión de reflejar fielmente en el campo político una realidad [...] sino, por el contrario, de la pretensión de identificarse con un sistema de ideas válidas [...]” Tulio Halperín Donghi, “Una nación para el desierto argentino,” in Halperín Donghi; Hora, *Una nación para el desierto argentino*, 85–86.

20 Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Arguing for a partial revision of Mehta’s statement on this matter, see Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Urban Space and Imaginaries

Informed by the idea that urban residents and space reciprocally constitute themselves, I view the two objects of this study, urban space and elites, as deeply entangled. Indeed, inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre, this book aims to historicize space and to reconstruct its constitution as an ever-changing social arrangement.²¹ In order to formulate a research question that is able to explore the production of space through a combination of a range of factors, this study resorts to the concept of the urban imaginary. Néstor García Canclini and Armando Silva perceive the urban imaginary as an aesthetic category by which the aesthetic, or the domain of perception and experience, is the result of the convergence between individual senses, socially constructed categories, and materiality, thus enabling a perspective on the entanglement between physical, mental, and social space.²² In a similar fashion, Alev Çinar and Thomas Bender view urban imaginaries as a way of regarding the city as “a field of experience” in which a dialectic between the physical and the social constitutes space.²³ According to Bender, this emphasis on experience and perception shifts scholarship away from the ahistorical dilemma on the urban “essence” towards a historical consideration of urban space as a contingent arrangement “marked by complex, conflicting, multiscaled, and dense processes, relations, and interconnections.”²⁴ Bender and Çinar underline that as the result of socially situated horizons of desire and taste, urban imaginaries are configured as competing narratives “conditioned by underlying relations of class, ethnicity, gender, race, or religion [seeking] to attain a hegemonic status.”²⁵ Therefore, urban imaginaries are always plural, contingent, and socially situated. By linking the questions concerning a social group and urban space, this book investigates how the liberal elites of Buenos Aires perceived and contributed to

21 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

22 See Anne Hufschmid, “From the city to lo urbano: Exploring cultural production of public space in Latin America,” *Iberoamericana* 12, no. 45 (2012); Armando Silva, *Imaginarios urbanos* (Bogotá: Editorial Nomos, 2006); Néstor García Canclini, *Imaginarios urbanos* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1997).

23 Alev Çinar and Thomas Bender, “The city: Experience, imagination, and place,” in Çinar; Bender, *Urban Imaginaries*, xi. Connecting Hispano- and Anglophone debates, see, Andreas Huyssen, “Introduction: World cultures, world Cities,” in *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age*, ed. Andreas Huyssen (Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 2008).

24 See Thomas Bender, “History, theory, and the metropolis,” in Brantz; Disko; Wagner-Kyora, *Thick Space*, 126.

25 Alev Çinar and Thomas Bender, “The city: Experience, imagination, and place,” in Çinar; Bender, *Urban Imaginaries*, xxi.

producing their city. More precisely, elaborating on the idea of the urban imaginary, it investigates how this experience was constructed at the intersection of socially situated horizons of desire and taste, global and local power relations, and materiality. Furthermore, it investigates the ways in which these imaginaries translated into proposals of urban reform and finally how these proposals were articulated, given the constraints created both by the confrontation between concurrent imaginaries and materiality.

Critical History of Elites through Urban Space

One of the central ideas of this study is that a focus on the production of urban space allows complementing the intellectual history of elites by countering its potential phantasmagoric tendencies. In fact, elite writings, fantasies, and desires for a certain urban space did not automatically bring it to life, as if by magic. The focus on urban space, intended as an arena where complex, multilayered, and diverse social constructions entangle and clash, allows a critical sense of perspective to emerge, from which the ambivalence and limits of the historical contribution of elites can be observed more clearly. Therefore, this book not only reconstructs how elites conceived and envisioned their city but also investigates the extent of the successes, limits, contradictions, and ambiguities that emerged as a result of the encounter between elite desires, the constraints of materiality, and the wishes of other social groups. In this regard, even though the entire study focuses on a group of white bourgeois men, its goal is to show the partiality and ultimate fragility of their imaginaries. As Donna Haraway argued, one of the main biases underlying the imaginaries of bourgeois men concerns their assertion that the minority position that they occupy is both universal and objective, thereby systematically marginalizing alternatives and rendering them invisible.²⁶ By highlighting both internal contradictions and ambivalences within elite imaginaries and their confrontation with alternative and conflicting imaginaries, this book reveals their partiality and aims to avoid the reproduction of their one-sided claim of universality and objectivity.

26 See Donna Haraway, "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988).

The need to figuratively plunge intellectual history into materiality in order to redress its potential phantasmagoric excesses, and to show the partiality of elite imaginaries through the means of urban history is especially urgent in the case of the *porteño* elites. In fact, despite its great diversity in terms of style and political background, historiography has conferred a role on the *porteño* elites in many cases that I consider to be problematic. This is especially true for the elites of the decades between 1852 and 1880, which historians commonly refer to as the years of 'national organization,' thus the period of modern Argentina's inception. Historians have often turned to these years and to the liberal elites who ruled the country during this period in the search for the origins of Argentina's national greatness, or alternatively its contrasting misery. On the one hand, so-called 'official,' state-supportive, and celebrative historiography has succeeded in projecting this group of men as the symbolic pantheon of the nation and declared them the heroic founders of the nation's greatness. On the other hand, 'revisionist' historians have preferred to view them as responsible for having sown the seeds for the suffering that followed. Right-wing 'revisionists' considered the liberals as the primary corrupters of the original rural, creole, and gaucho spirit of the nation. Left-wing 'revisionism' has instead portrayed the policies of the liberal elites as the driving force behind the country's submission to British and international capital.²⁷ Though the consideration of these elites has become far more nuanced and multifaceted since the 1980s, due to the scholarship of Argentine historians such as Tulio Halperín Donghi and Hilda Sabato, this tendency has been relatively slow to make inroads into Anglophone historiography on Argentina. Nicolas Shumway, for instance, spotted the ideological origins of the authoritarianism and populism in these elites that went on to afflict Argentina in the twentieth century.²⁸ More recently, historian Julia Rodríguez identified the unique connection between physicians and state elites that emerged in the last third of the nineteenth century as an explanation for what she describes as a general failure of the Argentine nation "to live up to its promise."²⁹ Outside the strict field of history, scholars driven by dependency theory have also viewed the creole elites, not only of Argentina but of Latin America in general, as a *lumpenbourgeoisie* that was entirely subjugated to European and North American capital, both culturally and econom-

27 See Goebel, *Argentina's Partisan Past*.

28 See Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

29 Julia Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2.