

Review: *The Argentine Folklore Movement*

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Oscar Chamosa. *The Argentine Folklore Movement: Sugar Elites, Criollo Workers, and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism, 1900-1955*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010. 288 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8165-2847-9.

In his recent publication, Latin American historian Oscar Chamosa explores the folklore movement in Argentina. Chamosa argues broadly that the history of Argentinean culture was highly influenced by this movement, which began during the early 20th century. More specifically, Chamosa suggests that this movement encouraged a dramatic shift in both political and public ideology, which in turn generated a “common national culture” for rural criollo Argentines and urban European Argentines (192).

Chamosa criticizes past scholars for ignoring the influence of the folklore movement and concentrating instead upon the development of the tango and soccer as the foundation of Argentinean culture. While he acknowledges that both tango and soccer helped to build national unity, he argues that they were the product of only urban, Europeanized spaces, whereas the folklore movement embraced rural, criollo traditions (192). The movement thus served to bridge a divide between the rural and the urban, the poor and the rich, and European Argentineans and native-born Argentineans (12). Folklore’s contribution to the nation-building process, Chamosa explains, “involved recasting rural workers’ culture as the authentic national culture at a time when Argentina was becoming predominately an urban and cosmopolitan society” (3).

Chamosa further critiques past scholars of Argentinean nationalism for silencing the influence of the personal stories and connections that existed between the nationalist movement and the folklore movement. Additionally, he calls for the folklore movement to be separated from Catholic nationalists. While the Catholic nationalist association played a minor support role, the predominant influences were cultural nationalists (intellectuals), regional (sugar farm) elites, and popular media producers and folklore artists (3). A combination of these groups’ ideological investments in the movement, he argues, “framed the rise of folklore as both an academic discipline and an artistic expression in Argentina” (7).

Chamosa divides the Argentine folklore movement into two branches: the academic and the public. Through a variety of primary sources, he explores the multiplicity of ways folklore bridged the gap between rural and urban Argentine populations, while at the same time it represented the ideals and frustrations of the poor and exploited mestizo criollos.¹ Inequality, racism, and discrimination in Argentine society were evident in these letters, song lyrics, and poems. As one folksong artist wrote:

¹ Also referred to as “rural criollos”, these individuals were the “peasants and rural workers of mixed race ... who lived in the country’s far interior provinces.” Often categorized as “uncivilized” by urban nationalists, they were exploited on sugar farms, and discriminated against by class and race (1-2).

I have a cousin; he is rich,
Powerful, and beloved.
I'm poor, and I'm ill,
[but] I can think, write, and dream...

He looked at me, indifferent,
Not letting his white hand
Shake mine,
And ashamed walked away
From his poor cousin, the dreamer (178).

Chamosa also reproduces original photographs, which serve to demonstrate how the movement began within rural communities, and spread through regional elites and, eventually, through popular media forms. For example, one photograph illustrates the use of folklore artists by sugar farm elites. The caption reads: "Popular celebration during the sugar cane harvest, Tucuman, November 1929. Note the presence of musicians and local notables, possible mill foremen and administrators. Behind them, harvesters sit on top of carts loaded with cut sugar cane" (78). Additionally, Chamosa gathers information from twenty different newspapers, over half a dozen interviews, and an abundance of secondary scholarship on the broader Argentine national movement. The newspapers serve to represent a changing nationalist ideology, and the interviews provided accounts that were never documented.

While Chamosa draws from nine different interviews conducted between 2000 and 2006, they do not have a strong presence in *The Argentine Folklore Movement*. Oral historians will find his focus on Argentine folklore interesting. The text would have been enriched, however, by including the actual voices of the interviewees, rather than summarizations or a passing mention. Furthermore, a section discussing methodology and providing information regarding the interviewees and the interviews themselves is missing from Chamosa's book.

Overall however, within the broad field of Argentine nationalism, Chamosa's 2010 publication is a groundbreaking contribution to the study of the influence of the folklore movement during the early 20th century. The expressions of celebrated folklore culture in present day Argentina have their roots in this movement, and as its presence remains strong in Argentinean society, *The Argentine Folklore Movement* provides an important and fresh perspective for oral historians, and to the broader discipline.