

La Biblioteca Nacional de la República de Argentina: The house that Moreno and Sarmiento
Built

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Abstract

The Biblioteca Nacional de la República de Argentina (Argentine National Library) is a venerated Latin American institution. It was established in 1884. Mariano Moreno (1778-1811) and Domingo Sarmiento (1811-1888) were both instrumental in the creation of this institution. As secretary of the First Junta, Moreno advocated for the establishment of the Biblioteca Pública de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Public Library). As President of Argentina, Sarmiento created agencies and legislation that propelled the necessity of a National Library.

I.

“Nothing is built on stone; all is built on sand,
but we must build as if the sand were stone” –Jorge Luis Borges

The *Biblioteca Nacional de la República de Argentina* (Argentine National Library) hunkers like a monstrous oil rig over the Recoleta, the Rodeo Drive of Buenos Aires; it is situated on the very block where Juan Domingo Perón and Eva Duarte (Evita) held court in their presidential palace (“Historia,” 2008). Some have labeled the structure at 2502 Calle Agüero a monstrosity, but mostly it has become a familiar fixture in Recoleta’s landscape. The *Biblioteca Nacional* exhibits characteristics of Brutalism, an architectural style “of exposed rough concrete and large modernist block forms, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s and which derived from the architecture of Le Corbusier” (“Brutalism,” 2008).

Finished in 1992, construction on the Biblioteca Nacional started in 1960 with the approval of Law 12.351 which designated 3 hectares for its construction (“Historia,” 2008). The citizens of Buenos Aires had to wait more than 30 years before the building was inaugurated on the 10th of April, 1992 (“Historia,” 2008). And, it took more than a year to orchestrate the transfer of the books, serials, and manuscripts, most of which was done manually, as if the employees of the library were industrious ants. However, the construction of the Biblioteca Nacional was left incomplete for several years in the late 80 when money simply ran out. According to Shirley Christian’s article, “Where the Perons lived, Inertia has a monument” (1990) in the New York Times, if it was not for the Antorchas Foundation, who knows whether construction on the library would have ever been completed; indeed, “Estimates of what it will cost to finish the library vary widely...\$10 million to \$14 million and...\$25million” (Christian, 1990).

The *Biblioteca Nacional* contains seven floors and three basements; overall, it possesses an area of 22,000 square meters (Zimmerman, 2004). The lower three floors serve as the repository for the library's Legal Deposit and house the Library School and various machines like microfiche readers. Despite the physical appearance of the *Biblioteca Nacional*, the structure's design allows for the basement floors (which carry the most weight) to act as a ballast, or anchor, and steady the structure as a whole. While the style of the building will always be open to further scrutiny, the mission of the *Biblioteca Nacional* has always been to entice visitors to "enter into the very history reading in Argentina" ("Historia," 2008). And for better or worse, the history of reading and libraries, in Argentina, has always been inextricably linked to sovereignty and civilization.

For example, the *Biblioteca Pública de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires Public Library) was "established on 7 September 1810 by an Executive Order of the Government Junta" (Zimmerman, 2004). Even though the Junta had myriad problems to rectify, they still found time to establish the *Biblioteca Pública*. The Secretary of the First Junta, Mariano Moreno (1778-1811), advocated for the creation of the *Biblioteca Pública* because he felt that "The education of young men was being ignored" and that the "military glory of the past four years had come at a high price, not only in terms of blood but in a loss of culture" (Wait, 1965). To drive this idea home, Moreno published an editorial titled "Education," (1810) in the *Gazeta de Buenos-Ayres*; in this editorial Moreno "assured his readers that the junta was determined to educate all. For this purpose a public library had been founded, where the citizens of Buenos Aires would have the opportunity to improve their minds." Furthermore, Moreno reminded his readers that "since Alexandria all the great civilizations possessed great libraries" (Wait, 1965).

II.

“Existing libraries, in their very being, seem to question the authority of those in power.” –Alberto Manguel

To what extent does a National Library validate nationalistic chutzpah? According to Richard Rubin in *Foundations of Library and Information Science*, "What distinguishes these [National Libraries] libraries is not simply their large collections; rather their special mission...to preserve the cultural heritage of the countries in which they were situated" (Rubin, 2004). Another objective of National Libraries is Legal Deposit, a method of collection that ensures at least one copy of every material published in that country comes to that country's National Library. Therefore, metaphorically, a National Library is where a country's cultural capital is stored, but literally, through the practice of Legal Deposit, it is also where every material published in that country comes to rest. The idea of National Libraries are not new; one could make the argument that the practice of Legal Deposit has been in effect since the seizure prerogative systemized by Ptolemy III during his administration of the Alexandrian Library.

Therefore, a National Library asserts a country's nationalistic chutzpah because it becomes that country's cultural silo, its vessel, and the citizenry fill it with their texts, the scholars organize and classify its parameters, and the librarians assist the citizenry to decipher those parameters so that they can freely access and scrutinize its materials. A National Library is not just an institute, it's a trove of national pride and a source of national intellectual propriety. A National Library is a library, then, funded by the national government with the explicit aim of augmenting its collection with all domestic materials published so that it may provide access (hopefully for free, or a nominal fee) to its citizenry for examination, scrutiny, and revision.

They are not the National Library's catalogs, collections, and codices; they are the catalogs, collections, and codices of a nation and its people. A National Library is also

responsible for materials published exclusively by the government. More importantly, a National Library produces a national bibliography, or a comprehensive list of all the materials published in one year in one country. Although not published every year, a national bibliography embodies the knowledge produced by one country. A national bibliography is the snapshot of the prevalent ideas, notions, and schema that occupied a country's waking moments. But, not all countries with a National Library produce a national bibliography.

In "Legal Deposit and the Collection of National Publications in Argentina" (2003), Claudia B. Bazán provides 14 concrete reasons why the Argentine National Library does not have a national bibliography. Among them are that "sanctions for not obeying the law are not clearly pointed out," and that "The persons and organizations obliged to deposit copies are not clearly defined in the text of the law" (2003). Bazán's main argument seems to be that Argentina laws pertaining to Legal Deposit aren't sufficiently enforced to ensure an accurate national bibliography is produced, "Given the fact that a national bibliography reflects a national collection, this lack could, in turn, explain the absence of a national bibliography in Argentina" (2003). In many ways, the Argentine National Library exemplifies a house built as if sand were stone. It has garnered laurels for its operations, collection, and history, but has been hampered by bouts of fiscal negligence and mismanagement which have in turn severely limited its impact.

It is no coincidence, then, that the National Library of Argentina was born in 1884 shortly after the presidency, 1868-1874, of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888). According to Ana María Peruchena Zimmerman in "Libraries in Argentina: an overview," Sarmiento "was undoubtedly the most relevant political character in connection with libraries in Argentina" (2004). According to Hector Felix Bravo, "Sarmiento's great concern, his greatest passion in life, was to educate the people, all the inhabitants of Argentina, raise their spiritual and economic

levels and thus secure the development of a free and sovereign nation” (1994). There is no doubt that Sarmiento saw libraries as a vehicle to transmit his ideals and democratize Argentina. To this end, “he established public libraries in fourteen parishes in Buenos Aires; he even set up a book loan system and mobile libraries managed by the Consejo General de Educación (General Council for Education), called popular libraries” (Zimmerman, 2004).

In addition, he provided for the future of libraries in Argentina in a very clear and concrete way. On the 23rd of September, 1870, Sarmiento passed Law #419 which created the Comisión Protectora de Bibliotecas Populares, or the National Protectorate Commission for Popular Libraries, with the purpose of fomenting the creation and development of libraries by diffusing a culture of reading. (“Que es Conabip,” 2008). Sarmiento established *La Comisión Nacional Protectora de Bibliotecas Populares* so that his ideals regarding the importance of reading in Education were not lost in History’s shuffle. Maybe he intuited the growing pains Argentina was going to have with democracy—it’s bouts with generals, dictators, starlets, and martyrs. But in his advocacy, was Sarmiento simply following a precedent that had been established by Moreno, or were his actions singular and original? The *Biblioteca Nacional de la Republica de Argentina* does not come into existence as an entity until 1884, but it is the founding of the *Biblioteca Pública* by Moreno and the First Junta that lays the foundation for the *Biblioteca Nacional*. In many ways, they are the same entity and both are inextricably linked to the idea of Education and Democracy in Argentina.

III.

“On ne tue point les idées”—Domingo Faustino Sarmiento

The above epigraph, from the French, translates roughly into “ideas can not be killed.” It can be found in the Author’s Forward of Sarmiento’s historical novel, *Facundo Quiroga, or Civilization and Barbarie* (1845) and succinctly states man’s disadvantage over ideas. Man is finite and temporal, whereas, ideas are infinite and timeless. Indeed, ideas can not be killed. They might get distorted, swept hastily aside, or become buried under a patina of half-truths; but, an idea’s shelf-life has no quantifiable limit. The idea of a National Library in Argentina can be traced back to Mariano Moreno (1778-1811) and the First Junta and their establishment of the Buenos Aires Public Library. It was their idea to establish a system of public, or popular, libraries in Argentina to educate the populace. Moreno invested heavily in the ideals of the First Junta and May Revolution but “Moreno was more interested in spreading Enlightenment” (Wait, 1965).

Likewise, the creation of the Argentine National Library in 1884 could not have been possible without Sarmiento’s actions as President of Argentina. Sarmiento created the Comisión Protectora de Bibliotecas Populares (1870) (National Protectorate Commission for Popular Libraries), opened 14 parish libraries in Buenos Aires, and even developed a program for mobile libraries. His devotion to ideals of democratic education can also be seen in his founding of “five national secondary schools...teaching farms for agricultural experimentation...founded the military and naval academies...allocated fund for the establishment of seminaries, and took the decision to organize the country’s first educational census” (Bravo, 1994). Sarmiento stewarded Argentina through its growing pains by creating national standards and systems. This might not have made him an exceptionally popular president, but it did stabilize Argentina and lay the foundations for the welfare of future generations. More importantly, Sarmiento ensured that even

though the *Biblioteca Nacional* was going to pass through adversity, it was going to remain a building made of sand but built on stone.

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