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**It Takes Two to Tango: The Dissemination of the Argentine Tango and the  
Promotion of a National Culture Under Juan Perón**

**Introduction**

For many of us, a dashing gaucho astride his sturdy horse overlooking the vast grasses of the pampas and the sensual music and lyrics of the tango are the thoughts evoked when we are asked to define Argentine culture. I will examine some of the processes that led the tango to become so strong a cultural icon for Argentina.

The Argentine tango is a complex genre that involves dance, music, poetry, philosophy, narrative and drama. It incorporates African, American and European cultural elements that are the roots of Argentine history (Azzi 2002). It symbolizes the acceptance of diversity and the inclusion of marginality within the system. It was with these elements in mind that Perón attached himself to the tango. I will discuss the ways in which Juan Perón and his administration supported and then changed the future of the tango. It is my contention that Perón fostered the widespread dissemination of the tango; that he ultimately politicized the music to the point that it no longer expressed the Argentine social reality; and that as a “new” tango was created to represent the national

culture, it focused on nostalgia and the dance form rather than serving as a source of social commentary.

Juan Perón worked to create a national culture which would be defined, in part, by the tango. Juan Domingo Perón became the president of Argentina in 1946 and remained in power until 1955. He was a nationalist and a populist who recognized that the economic repression of the popular classes by the oligarchy could be eased by social and political reforms to eventually disseminate wealth, cultivate growth in domestic industries and thereby create an enlarged new consumer class within the country. He fomented the widespread acceptance of tango music, which he used as a way of identifying himself with the working class.

### **The Origins of Tango: Early Influences and Themes**

To understand why Perón looked to the tango as a means to strengthen the national culture and identity and to gain support through the tango among the popular or lower classes, it is necessary to examine the origins of the tango itself. Like so much surrounding the tango, even the origin of the word is unclear and the subject of debate. There are three prevailing theories. The first, supported by historian Ricardo Molas, is that the word comes from the African word tango meaning “closed place.” A second theory is that tango comes from the Portuguese word *tangere*, meaning to touch. The third proposes that tango is onomatopoeic, and represents the sound of a drumbeat, *tan-go* (Collier et. al. 1995). The debate over the origins of the word reflects the debate over influences on the creation of the music.

Many believe the musical elements of the tango originated from Afro-argentinians, while others, including prominent Argentine intellectual Jorge Luis Borges, totally reject this idea. Yet, there is a general consensus that the rhythm of the dance comes from the African *candombe*, a dance performed during religious processions of slaves in Buenos Aires and Montevideo (Jakubs 2000). Many historians believe that a second influence comes from the *habanera*, an Afro-Cuban dance, reportedly brought to the port city of Buenos Aires by sailors returning from the Antilles (Rossi 1926). The *habanera* merged over time with the *milonga*, which was a dance form practiced by rural farmers in areas outside of Buenos Aires. Jorge Rivera, who contributed to the series *La historia del tango*, traces the dances chronologically from *habanera* to *milonga* to tango. He concludes that the tango encompasses the melodic line and emotional sentiment of the *habanera*, the choreography of the *milonga* and the rhythm of the *candombe* (Matamoro 1971).

The tango developed in the *arrabales*, or outskirts of Buenos Aires, where there was contact between African-Argentines and *compadritos*. Africans arrived in Buenos Aires because it was a port of entry of the slave trade. A *compadrito* was a young native man, usually poor, described as a tough street man, though not generally criminal, who lived in the *arrabales* and often frequented the brothels, or *clandestinos*, in those areas. In his book *Crónica general del Tango*, José Gobello quotes Ventura Lynch, a student of tango and author on the subject. He writes “the *milonga* is danced only by the *compadritos* of the city, who have created it as a mockery of the dances the blacks hold in their own places” (1999). While the precise origins are unclear, it is well documented that

by assimilating the African dance, the *compadritos* created the first tango in Buenos Aires.

While the tango developed in the outskirts of Buenos Aires and was initially popular among the urban poor, it would eventually become accepted by the middle class and the elite. Perón would come to support the art form as a means of identifying himself with the working classes and then popularize the tango as a nationalistic art form, decreed acceptable to all classes of Argentines. However, his mainstreaming of the tango led to many changes in the music, both in the lyrics and in the orchestration.

### **The First Stage of the Tango: La Guardia Vieja**

What is known as the first stage of tango development, between the years 1880 and 1917, is referred to as “*La Guardia Vieja*,” or “The Old Guard” (Castro 1991). During this stage the tango was mainly a marginalized music and dance form of the urban poor, both creoles and immigrants. The early dissemination locales were the popular theaters, dance halls, *academias* (cafes for dancing), brothels, and the streets of Buenos Aires. As the tango became popular among the middle class it eventually moved to dance salons and concert halls.

The first tango lyrics surfaced in 1880, the same year that Buenos Aires, Argentina’s richest city, due to its status as a port, became the federal capital of the country. Not only was Buenos Aires the country’s richest city, but Argentina was one of the world’s richest nations, owing to an expansion in ranching and agriculture during the presidency of General Julio Argentino Roca from 1880–86 and from 1898–1904 (Clark

2002). By 1920 more than 8 million European immigrants, with the majority being from Spain and Italy, radically transformed the character of the Argentine population (Collier et. al. 1995, 21). It was this new group of immigrants who would bring the tango to the city and have a profound effect on Buenos Aires. According to Donald S. Castro in his book The Argentine Tango as Social History (1880-1955), the great size of the immigrant influx contributed to the real cultural transformation in Argentina – “almost a remaking of the national culture” (35). One example of this is the emergence of *lunfardo*, a largely Italian-derived local vocabulary that was later favored by writers of tango lyrics. Like the tango, *lunfardo* became an integral part of the urban identity and culture of Buenos Aires.

Concurrently, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the country’s economic boom occurred, there was a large emphasis in Argentina on creating a “Europe in America.” This can be seen in the Parisian architecture and Italian opera house in Buenos Aires. This Eurocentric vision of the ruling elites denigrated and devalued the native creole population who then expressed their feelings of exclusion and social devaluation through the tango. The music became “the symbolic refuge of the urban creole population against the rapid destruction of familiar values, of a familiar physical urban environment, and in their relative importance in the development of modern Argentine society” (Jakubs 2000: 139). Because the tango was popular among racially-mixed creoles it was rejected by the racist and Eurocentric elite as being barbaric. Yet, it is precisely because of the tango’s association with the creoles that Perón would later support the music as he rejected foreign influences.

One popular tango, written by Nimesio Trejo in 1907, is called “The Tenants’ Tango” and exposes the many abuses suffered by the creole and immigrant populations

living in the slums. The song protests “Down with the unfair charges and down with their abuses; up with justice for the poor have rights too” (Castro 1991: 111). This song is just one of many tangos written in this time period to express social discontentment. Many tango songs written during the first and second stages of the tango’s development were able to express not only social discontentment, but also comment on the reality of life for the poor. This is significant because under Perón the tango loses its ability to do this.

Other tangos of this period tell of the dreams of immigrants crushed by the harsh realities of Argentina and of their fears that *compadritos* will steal their daughters from them. One of the first lyrical tangos to be recorded was sung by Carlos Gardel, who would later become the most famous *tanguero* (tango musician) of his time, and who would be, as Peron would, a symbol of Argentina and its masses.

### **The Second Stage of the Tango: Epoca de Oro**

Donald Castro characterizes the second phase of tango as the “Epoca de Oro,” or the Golden Age. This stage began in 1917 with the first recorded lyrical tango, “La Noche Triste”, written by Pascal Contursi and recorded in 1917, and ended with the military coup in 1943. The second stage ends with the military coup and Perón’s presidency because the themes and orchestration of the music changed significantly after 1943, as I will examine later. The political situation in Argentina also changed during the “Epoca de Oro.” In 1916, with the election of Hipólito Yrigoyen, the Radicals (UCR) won the presidency and gained control of congress. The Radical Party was founded by a middle class constituency and was the first party to challenge the elites. Previously, the

urban elites and rural landowning oligarchy had contended for power while excluding the middle and working classes. However, after the formation of the Radical Party (UCR), the Radicals held the presidency from 1916 to 1932.

In the first lyrical tangos, immigrants expressed their experiences through the music, addressing themes such as nostalgia for their homelands, alienation and the struggle against the then-unsympathetic environment of Buenos Aires. In this way, the tango became a symbol by which both creoles and immigrants established their place in society and their independence.

The social and ethnic class conflict among the elite, the immigrants, and the urban poor creole was reflected in the art of tango dancing and in its lyrics. Andrés Carretero writes in El compadrito y el tango that:

The authentic people...created, as a counterpart opposing the immigration and selling of the national patrimony (of national wealth to foreigners by the elite), the only true Argentine artistic expression: the tango, to save the soul of the people (quoted in Castro 1995, 124).

It was not until the election of Perón in 1946 that the masses would have a significant voice in Argentina and be incorporated into the political system. Because of their relative exclusion from politics during the “Epoca de Oro,” the immigrant and creole poor expressed their discontentment with elite rule through the tango. This can be seen in the lyrics of “Cambaleche,” a tango written by Enrique Santos Discépolo, “It is the same, he who works night and day like an ox, he who lives off others, he who kills, he who cures the sick, or is outside the law” (Castro 1991).

This time period saw years of economic prosperity from 1919-1929 and economic depression from 1929-1939. Tango lyrics during the depression periods represented “a mournful sense of frustration” (Gobello 1991). During the economic boom of the 1920s

many people living in the *arrabales* were able to find work in Buenos Aires and migrated to the city. As wages increased, the working class was able to participate in leisure activities, including dancing and going to the cinema, which led to more contact between the poor and the middle class. Once the tango was brought to Buenos Aires, it soon became music of the cabaret and became orchestral as well as vocal (Defino 1968). The new means of dissemination became the big band and vocalists. The mass media also played a role in the dissemination of the tango as recordings popularized the vocalists and films popularized the dance form. Most authors agree that the tango's explosion in popularity occurred when it began to be broadcast on radio programs.

The physical environment of Buenos Aires changed as well during these years, as major infrastructure projects were carried out, resulting in growth of the city. New buildings were erected and the heart of the city was torn apart to create one of the city's biggest avenues, *Avenida 9 de Julio* (Collier et. al.1995). These changes produced a sense of loss of the old city and many nostalgic tangos were written, reflecting a sense of longing for the simpler city of the 1920s. This can be seen in "Caminito" written by Gabino Coria Penaloza in 1927, "Little street that you once were bordered with clover and bunches of flowers, a shadow you soon will be, a shadow the same as I" (Castro 1991).

During this time, houses of prostitution were outlawed, provoking a significant change in the nightlife of Buenos Aires. The venues of the tango moved from the *bordello* to cabarets, popular theaters and *academias*, or cafes and bars which served as dance venues, in the *arrabales* outside of Buenos Aires. The *academias* were often shadowy places in which waitresses could be hired for dancing and often as prostitutes,



and the police shut many down. It is interesting, however, that the tango made its way into the upper classes by way of the brothels (Collier et. al. 1995). Sons of well-to-do families frequented brothels and *academias* where they learned to dance the tango from prostitutes. Some early tango themes of this period centered around the prostitute and her world, as seen in the title of tangos of the time, such as “Seven Inches,” “Forbidden Entry” and “Whore House.” As the tango made its way into the upper classes through the youth, it became less improvised and the first tango music was written for the piano, though the music and the dance were still largely dismissed by the upper classes as lascivious and crude (Ferrer 1970).

By 1920 the tango would begin to acquire international fame as young elite Argentine men brought the tango to Europe as they traveled the region. These were the same men who learned the dance in brothels and *academias*, in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ciria 1987). The tango quickly became the rage in Paris, much to the dismay of the Argentines living there. Once accepted in Europe, the tango underwent several changes before it appeared in wealthy dance salons in Buenos Aires. The dance steps became less complicated and the tango became the cultural symbol of both the creole and porteño population as it was appropriated by the middle class (Vila 1991). As it made its way to the center of Buenos Aires and out of the *arrabales* via Europe, it ceased to belong to the creoles and the immigrants and came to represent a broader Argentine reality. Once accepted by the *porteños* (citizens of Buenos Aires urban society) the tango would soon become the national music of Argentina.

Pablo Vila proposes that the tango was a part of hegemony construction in Argentina and that this implies “transaction and negotiation between social actors

involved in a particular social formation” (Vila: 108). Through this hegemony, the tango became acceptable among the upper classes. He states that the hegemonic (elite) class must adopt the interests of the popular sectors to construct an “expansive hegemony” without changing the essential economic interests of the hegemonic class. He also argues that the tango participated as a discourse in the struggle for meaning that is part of the construction of hegemony. Donald Castro points out that

The evolution of tango from *suburbio* [slum] (1880-1895) and the houses of prostitution in the port area, to the area of Palermo (1900) and from there to La Boca, to its acceptability in downtown cafes (ca.1910) and the final triumph in Europe (Paris 1912) is a careful evolution of a sinful dance to one of acceptance (1983:74).

The members of high society who frequented the brothels became supporters of the tango. “The patronage that came from the upper class boys allowed the middle class to publicly embrace the music that best represented its own heritage” (Vila:111). The middle class fully embraced the tango with the emergence of *tango-canción* (lyrical tangos) after 1917.

Middle class acceptance of the tango involved a clean-up of the dance, the music and the lyrics. These changes in the tango can be related to the process of the construction of hegemony by the ruling class during this time. Vila asserts that while the tango’s growing acceptance entailed the recognition of the working classes, who were previously ignored, it also enabled the ruling class that governed Argentina in the 1920s to consolidate their hegemony using the tango. The ruling class used tango to reconstruct the idea of *argentinidad* “in a country where the impact of the immigrant process almost blurred the national profiles” (Vila: 112). Through the tango, the urban popular class and the middle class were able to gain social cultural recognition. In this manner, the tango

played a role in the changing political climate. This idea is reaffirmed by Pablo Vila who believes “the tango... participated in the field of culture that, in the political field, allowed Radicalism to win the elections in 1916 and to occupy office until 1930” (113). Another author, Blas Matamoro agrees with Vila, “As Radicalism accepted the agreement and became a liberal party, so tango accepted the clean-up and left the outskirts, losing its original impenetrability” (1982:73). The social recognition of the urban popular sectors that the tango produced encompassed the acknowledgement of the old creole heritage. The tango played an important role in representing that heritage by addressing its problems and reflecting on its urban environment.

Tango singers and orchestras came to be in great demand in the late 1920s, making expertise in the art form a way in which urban poor and immigrants could move up the social ladder and gain acceptance from the urban middle class. By the 1930s “extremely stylized, the tango’s once sensual elements have been refined and smoothed to the point that the dance has been called a monotonous and expressionless dance with the stylized rhythm of coupling” (Vila 1991: 112). As the dance began to change, the lyrics evolved as well.

While tango lyrics initially related to the life of the brothels and street gamblers, and expressed social discontentment of the popular class, once accepted by the elite, tango themes became increasingly molded by the *porteño*, or urban white, perception of life in Buenos Aires. Three common tango themes were anguish, nostalgia, and women. The world is portrayed as a cruel, deceptive and unjust. This can be seen in the tangos of a very prominent writer, Enrique Santos Discépolo. He writes of the hopelessness of life because the world lacks a spiritual and moral hierarchy (Galasso 1973). Nostalgia refers

to how the immigrants express longing for their home country and also longing for one's old neighborhood, or *barrio*. Women, another common tango theme, are generally idolized and placed on a pedestal, or conversely blamed for all of man's suffering and anguish.

Perhaps one reason the tango was able to gain almost universal popularity in Argentina in the 1920's and 30's is because the lyrics reflect the social themes and the reality of lower and middle class *porteños* of the time, which groups constituted a majority of the population. Tango lyrics of the period describe the desolation of urban life and the defeatist attitudes of a population living in a country rich in natural resources yet unable to live up to its potential and compete with the United States and Canada in the world market. Thus, by the early 1940's the tango, while accepted by the elite and middle class, still generally reflected social discontentment and its sad tone expressed the realities of urban life. It was not until 1946, when Perón was elected, that the tango would be politicized to the point that it would no longer be able to comment on the *porteño* reality.

### **The Presidency of Juan Perón**

Nationalist thought emerged in Argentina around 1910 as the belief that nations would benefit from acting independently rather than collectively, emphasizing national rather than international goals. Nationalists of the time were devoted to the interests and culture of their own nation. Its early proponents aimed to "keep alive a system whose flaws were already obvious by infusing the state with new vitality and by fostering

nationalistic sentiments in the children of immigrants” (Plotkin 2003: 7). The goal of these nationalists was to strengthen the nation to resist foreign influence and imperialism. While nationalists in Argentina were not able to unify and form a viable party, nationalist thought became very influential among the lower classes and the ranks of the army. Juan Domingo Perón, an army general, would later be a strong proponent of this school of thought.

Until 1916, a landed elite, whose interests were in the export market, governed Argentina. The vast majority of the population was excluded from participation in the political system. In 1916 Hipólito Yrigoyen won the elections in Argentina. Yrigoyen was a member of the UCR, Unión Cívica Radical, the Radical Party. The Radical Party’s attempt at incorporating the masses set the stage for Perón and his populist administration, which came to power in 1946. Perón would support the rights and powers of the common people, the masses, in their struggles against a privileged elite class. This marked the beginning of a new stage of mass political participation.

Perón’s rise to power began on June 4, 1943 when a group of army officers, the Grupo de Oficiales Unidos (G.O.U), or Group of United Officers, seized power from the government of Ramón Castillo (1942-1943) in order to prevent the election of Robustiano Patrón Costas and Manuel Iriondo. The probable election of these men was seen by the officers as “a continuance of the bankrupt political policies of the coalition of conservative landed oligarchies and the middle class Radical Party the Unión Cívica Radical, or UCR” (Goldwert 1972). The time between 1932 and 1943 was called the “Infamous Decade” because many nationalists saw it as a time in which national values, culture, and ethics were devalued in an attempt to make Argentina subservient to foreign

interests (Galasso 1973). General Pedro Ramírez became the head of state, but was soon replaced by General Edelmiro Farrell, a friend of Perón, in March of 1943.

Juan Perón was appointed to the Ministry of War and served as Vice President under Farrell. In order to secure his position of power, Perón created a new power base among the working classes both in Buenos Aires and in the rural areas. Between 1943 and 1945 he accomplished this by supporting policies that strengthened labor unions as well as creating new ones, drawing on the nationalist sentiment of the time. However, in October of 1945, Perón was removed from office. Incensed workers marched to the presidential building and demanded his return to power (Hernandez 1977). Perón's strategy of gaining the support of the masses served him well and he was returned to his post on October 27, 1945. Subsequently, in the presidential elections of 1946, Perón won the presidency by a large majority and took office on February 24. He served as the president for almost two terms until he was overthrown on September 16, 1955.

Perón's power base consisted of the previously ignored working classes and of the emerging industrial middle class. "Both of these groups found in Perón a champion who expounded a protectionist view of nationalism, meshed with what was perceived as a social conscience" (Castro 1991: 208). Peronism was both a nationalist and a populist movement as it incorporated the interests of the popular classes, taking its voice from the marginal sectors of society and the migrants from the interior (*cabecitas negras*), who had previously been excluded from the political sphere. Perón's politics also had ties to the Catholic Church and were viewed as having creole virtue. These ideas became the framework for culture in the "new" Argentina post 1946, a culture that would incorporate the tango as an emblem of the Argentine national identity.

Once President, Perón used the power of the state to meld together a disciplined following. The Peronist regime employed *compre nacional*, “a politics that favored the manufacture of Argentine products, with a subsequent ban on imports” (Azzi 2002). He nationalized the Central Bank, re-staffed the university and judiciary with persons loyal to him and established nearly complete control over the press and the radio.

Industrialization created many new jobs for Argentines. A new industrial middle class emerged as the poor were able to obtain work and to experience upward social mobility, increasing Perón’s popularity among the working classes.

After World War II, the quality of life improved in Argentina because the country’s exports sold well in Europe and imports were replaced by production within the country, due to Perón’s focus on industrialization. Employment and salaries were high. Perón spent large sums of money to buy foreign-owned public services including trains, gas and telephones (Azzi 2002). Also, by nationalizing industries and land from private owners, many social and labor gains were made, expanding Perón’s popularity.

### **The Perón Administration’s Influence on Popular Culture and the Tango**

Perón wanted to create a national culture of Argentina that would incorporate popular culture and cosmopolitan ideas. The tango was useful to him because the political base for Perón was also the cultural base for the tango. “The most transcendental factor in support of the tango as a part of *porteño* culture was the Peronist leaders themselves, Juan and Eva Perón” (Castro 1986). However, by supporting and aiding in the widespread dissemination of the tango, he ultimately changed the future of the music.

Interestingly, the rags to riches story of Perón's success mirrors that of Carlos Gardel, the most noted *tanguero*. Furthermore, his image as a friend to workers while at the same time the champion of industrialists mirrors that of Gardel as well. Perón realized this and attempted to identify himself with Gardel.

Carlos Gardel is well known as the most famous tango singer in Argentina and as a symbol of the *porteño*. He lived from 1890-1935, recording his first tango in 1917 and continuing to write and record music until his death in a plane crash in 1935 (Rico Salazar 1991). After his death his music maintained its popularity and several movies were made about his life, many being produced by the state-owned film industry under Perón. Perhaps his widespread popularity, especially among the lower and middle classes was due, in part, to his rise from poverty in a poor district of Buenos Aires to a wealthy and internationally renowned star. Many of his tangos express the incomplete family, as Gardel was an illegitimate son and never married nor had any children. Many of the lower classes could identify with this because poverty and immigration to the city often created unstable families (Defino 1968). Gardel represented the creole and immigrant poor, just as Perón attempted to do. Gardel became an "authentic national expression and an Argentine passion" (Castro 1986: 150).

Perón recognized the popularity of Gardel and his status as an icon and attempted to capitalize on this by uniting himself with Gardel as a symbol of popular culture and social mobility. Perón's success in this endeavor can be seen in a work published by the Argentine Senate, as Donald Castro cites *El tango y Gardel*, released in 1975 (1986). This document invokes the image of Perón as the leader of the Argentine masses and describes him as the leader of a movement of social justice and liberation whose mission



was to be a teacher of the masses. The government publication also states “Perón knew the tango,” and that the “Argentine essence lives through the tango” (translated in Castro 1986). Thus, if Gardel was a symbol of the tango, Perón felt he was, as well. The same people who loved the tango and many famous tangueros, also loved Perón. As a result, tango lyrics would soon cease to be written about the reality of life in Argentina, to avoid critiquing the regime and incurring censure.

The Perón government made its position regarding its cultural orientation clear from the beginning. Alberto Ciria breaks down the Peronist concept of culture into three components: culture as a common good, “national culture” as a blend of classical and modern universal ingredients with national traditions, and a cultural product which was better and more widely distributed (1974). Perón stated in 1946 “the state has to concern itself with the culture of the people, because nations that lack a culture of their own are highly vulnerable to becoming semi-colonial countries” (Miller 1995). Argentine people were directed by decrees to take pride in the national sentiment and to reject all foreign influences. While both tango and folk music were accepted as national music that originated in Argentina, tango music had a more widespread appeal both within Argentina and throughout the world. Thus tango became more useful as a basis for creating national sentiment and pride in the nation. Music played an essential role in the nationalist project because of its popularity among diverse social groups and because its messages conveyed via radio could be disseminated to a wide audience, including the illiterate. What’s more, radio content could also be closely monitored and controlled by the government. One of the principal tools Perón would use to build his political base was the radio. Juan and Eva Perón knew the power of the mass media and made many

speeches on the radio. It allowed them to communicate the Peronist message to many Argentines who were illiterate. Eva Perón hosted a series of popular events at the Colón opera house, one of many examples of their using cultural events and venues, formerly the province of the elite, to attract the lower classes. A musical show was organized on the radio called *Estrellas a mediodía* and featured many famous tango artists, further broadening the music's popularity (Azzi 2002).

In 1944 under General Ramírez, all radio stations had to be Argentine-owned and devote a specific amount of time to Argentine music and composers. In 1944 "*la ley seca*" was passed in order to censor radio broadcasts so the "public morals would not be corrupted" (Crassweller 1987). This had a great effect on tango music as *lunfardo* was basically banned from the radio because it was viewed as a slang that corrupted the Spanish language. Tango language now had to be "national," so it was cleaned up by the authorities and *lunfardo* was suppressed. The title of a popular tango written by Enrique Santos Discépolo, "Yira Yira" (meaning aimless wandering) discussed earlier, was changed to "Dad vueltas, dad vueltas" because yira is a *lunfardo* word (Defino 1968). In 1943 Discépolo went to speak with Perón, at that time the Secretary of Labor and Social Welfare Colonel, about the importance of the tango and its *lunfardo* lyrics to the Argentine people. Discépolo stated that:

To have us without the tango would be the same as to make us all speak English...to these people, it does not bother them that all the kids go around swinging their hips to the rhythm of the rumba, nor does it bother them that all the guys go around wiggling like sissies with the bolero, but my poor little "Yira Yira" that bothers them! (Castro 1999)

Perón lifted the censorship of lyrics in March 1949 after receiving a delegation of leading tango figures, including Enrique Santos Discépolo. It is interesting to note that

after their meeting, Perón and Discépolo became friends and the musician later became a strong advocate of Peronism. Unfortunately, when Perón was ousted from power in September 1955, efforts were made to “deperonize” Argentina (Azzi 2002). Peronist musicians, such as Discépolo, who had a theater named after him, were often shunned after Perón lost power.

During the 1940s tango magazines, which included lyrics and articles on the tango, were popular. The revival of the tango as a dance had an impact not only on the lyrics, but also on the structure of tango ensembles, as larger orchestras were needed. I will expand on the changing focus of tango lyrics later in this paper. In this way, tango musicians evolved from improvising in bars to becoming professional, classically-trained artists who played in large concert halls. Jobs were created for musicians as Perón mandated that every cinema had to feature live performances, and the performance of foreign musicians was limited. Seventy-five percent of the artists played on each radio station had to be Argentine (Tandenciarz 2000).

Still, the traditional themes of the tango and its language were rejected in the vision of a “new” Argentina that sought to find inspiration from within, to reject foreign influence, to adhere to Catholic morals, and to lead a revolution that would bring the masses to the forefront of the political scene. Education and culture were seen as ways to “serve the higher destiny of Argentine morality” (Plotkin 2003). Foreign ideas formed the basis of the liberal Argentina that was now being overthrown in favor of the “new” Argentina. In the “new” Argentina, Perón believed cultural identification should be achieved through introspection, looking for inspiration within the country itself.

Perón professed ideas about culture in the “new” Argentina. He wanted to begin a Peronist cultural revolution and he asserted that the “new” culture was to be mass oriented. The purpose of the new culture was to assist in the achievement of national goals and had to be purely Argentine (Delaney 2002). He believed the focus of Argentine culture should be on the traditional Hispanic-creole values, which had been despised in the past. The 1949 Argentine Constitution provided for the reelection of the president (to secure Perón’s spot at the helm) and to add new focus to the working class. Article No. 37 established that the mission of culture would begin with education in the national universities (Goldwert 1972); each school had to establish mandatory coursework for students of the “essence of Argentine-ness through an appreciation of the spiritual, social and political reality of their country, its evolution and its historic mission” (Spektorowski 2003: 132). Perón hoped that with a cultural education, university students would become an educated political elite who would serve as guides to unite the masses.

However, Perón encountered difficulties creating a Peronist culture because he was, for the most part, incapable of attracting intellectuals to publicly share and communicate his message. Only a few well-known intellectuals supported Perón, among them Enrique Santos Discépolo. Perón created a Secretary of Culture who would function under the Ministry of Education so that the arts would, in effect, belong to the State. Freedom of speech and religion had been under attack since the military coup of 1943. Religious teaching in public schools became obligatory and non-Catholic students were made to attend classes on morality (Plotkin 2003).

Tangos from the 1920s that portrayed women as prostitutes did not have a place in Peronist Argentina because the conditions that fostered that lifestyle choice no longer

existed. Women received the vote in 1949 and attained full rights. The new image of women was to be one of the sacrificing mother, and is reflected in tangos of this period as well as in many of Gardel's compositions.

The tango lyrics and themes of sadness, loneliness, and poverty, central to the art form since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were inappropriate in the "new" Argentina. The tango almost always focused on the individual. Peronism called for the end of the individualist mentality and a collective effort to guide Argentina into its great future. Still, the government supported the tango. In 1948 a company called Argentine Sono Film, part of the government-controlled film industry, produced a feature film, *La historia del tango*. The story line centered around two of the most influential *tangueros*, Francisco García Jiménez and Enrique Cadícamo (Castro 1999) and presented the tango as a nostalgic, though favorable, facet of *porteño* culture. A film of this magnitude could not have been made without the support and approval of the government. While Perón was in office, the state-controlled film industry made three feature films about Gardel (Castro 1999). Even immigrants and middle class *porteños* were able to identify with the tango and its hero Gardel. These films' widespread appeal helped to disseminate the tango to broader audiences both nationally and internationally.

There are no actual Peronist tangos, though a number of tango artists supported the president and gave radio talks on his behalf. Some musicians, including tango artist Raúl Kaplan, who refused to join the Peronist Party, were banned from the radio (Azzi 2002). In fact, in order for most musicians to obtain work they had to become members of the Peronist Party. Still, some artists believed that Perón favored the tango, in part because his famous wife Eva Perón was friendly with many prominent *tangueros*.

Perón felt that culture should exist for the masses and not for the elite; however, he needed elite support and for this he would have to find a cultural expression to which all economic and social classes could relate. Although Perón was not an elitist and built his power base among the working classes, he was able to incorporate the elite culture into the new national culture through the tango (which became popular among the upper class during the 1940s as the music became more conservative). Perón used the tango as a symbol of his goals for a “new” Argentina because the music represented the working class Perón sought to incorporate more fully into the nation. By politicizing and censoring the music he would change what was at the heart of tango, its reflection of the Argentine reality.

The tango was so fixed in its old structures that the most important *tangueros* of the period, who were also supporters of Peronism, were unable to link their lyrics with the new social process that was occurring. Additionally, some tango poets, including Discépolo, abandoned tango to participate in politics.

The problem was that the tango was so fixed in its meanings and connotations that it is almost impossible to conceive of a tango that reflects anything but sadness, a sentiment greatly at odds with the everyday life of rural immigrants and workers who acquired their citizenship during the Peronist period (Vila 1991: 130).

Because *tangueros* were unable to comment on the “new” Argentine reality, they focused on the past and continued to write nostalgic tangos.

Additionally, in the 1940s the tango evolved from the *tango-canción*, in which the lyrics and musical content were of central importance, to *tango-danza*, favoring the movement and the dance in salons and concert halls (Jakubs 1984). In this way the offensive lyrics of the old tangos were no longer a problem. The tango during the Perón era became a vehicle for dance rather than for the expression of the social reality and

discontentment. Enrique Santos Discépolo expresses feelings of nostalgia in the tango “Cafetín,” written in 1948, “Nostalgia for things that have passed, sand carried away by life... bad dreams of neighborhoods that are no more and the bitterness of dying dreams” (Castro, 1991). When lyrics were played they were nostalgic and generally contained little social content.

Donald Castro believes that nostalgia was a sign of the impact of Peronist censorship that was understood by those who wrote tangos (1991). While early tangos reflected life in the slums of Buenos Aires, they ceased to do so in the 1940s. Yet during this time the problem of shanty-towns, or *villas miseria*, became a growing problem and a serious political issue, as they became located throughout the city and were not confined to distinct areas. Thus, a tango about slums in the 1940s could be seen as a critique of the regime. “Tango authors appeared to seek the security of their past by turning their back, at least in the lyrics, to the reality about them and by seeking the security of the barrios of their youth in the 1920s” (Castro 1991: 243). In this way, the tango was no longer able to serve as a social commentary. This silence reflects the impact of the Perón era as a period when the tango lost its ability to comment on the reality of the day. The voice of the tango became increasingly nostalgic and it lost its power to reflect the contemporary reality of *porteño* life.

## **Conclusions**

We see that in the initial stages of tango’s development, the music was identified with the poor urban classes of Buenos Aires and shunned by the cultural elite. The

*arrabales* and bordellos and the characters inside them served as the inspiration for the composers. The national cultural void that existed in a society of urban poor, immigrants and wealthy landowners was filled by the tango, which incorporated the marginalized classes. The upper classes rejected native Argentine culture in favor of foreign influences in seeking to “Europeanize” Argentina in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. When the tango arrived in Europe and gained worldwide fame, the international community associated it with Argentina and it soon became accepted as a symbol of the urban identity at home as well.

Due to the nationalist orientation of his view of government, Perón sought to create a national culture and used music to achieve this goal. In order for the tango to become a part of the Argentine national identity, it had to reflect the styles and the reality of a broad segment of the population. This was achieved, in part, through the widespread dissemination of the tango through the mass media, supported by the Perón administration. The change in lyrical content was due in part to censorship and pressure to endorse Peronism.

Between 1880 and 1917, while the tango was still in its early stages of development, the art form was improvised in bars and cafés. Its themes of alienation, sensuality, prostitution, and urban life in the slums commented on the reality of urban poor and immigrants. Elite influence on the tango and its “Europeanization” can be seen in its evolution to an art form that was played by orchestras in salons for dancing with themes of anguish and nostalgia, which reflected the sentiments of most *porteños*. It is strange that the tango became nationalized because in reality it is *porteño*; its themes and interpreters reflect Buenos Aires and not the rest of the nation.



However, through government-sponsored promotion and elite acceptance, the tango did become the primary cultural icon of the Argentine identity, which reflected Peronist resistance to an elite- imposed European culture that had been so readily accepted in pre-Perón Argentina. There is a lack of scholarship addressing the formation of a national identity in Argentina through the use of popular culture and I believe future research should investigate how the rural identity of Argentina has contributed to the national culture and identity of the country.

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