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## Buenos Aires, 1910 Centenary of the Nation



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### Synonyms

[Argentina](#); [Buenos Aires](#); [Enrique Gómez Carrillo](#); [Haussmann](#); [Slums](#); [Walter Benjamin](#)

In 1910 Buenos Aires was the scene for the celebrations of the Centenary of the Argentine nation. This was also the moment in which the capital city staged the consolidation of its urban modernity (Gorelik 2005: 146). The modern growth of the city of Buenos Aires, which had gone from having 177,787 inhabitants in 1869 to 950,891 in 1904, was inaugurated with the opening up of the Avenida de Mayo – with its cafés, art nouveau, neoclassical, and eclectic buildings, trees, and streetlights – on July 9, 1894. Commenced under the supervision of the political conservative Torcuato de Alvear in 1885, the expansion of the avenue was contemporaneous with the creation of the Plaza de Mayo, the Parque de la Recoleta, and the projects for Puerto Madero. As such it formed part of an urban plan for modernizing the city center inspired by Baron Haussmann’s earlier remodeling of Paris during the empire of Napoleon III. The Avenida de Mayo was envisaged as a

32-m-wide boulevard with central pedestrian islands that were going to leave the necessary space for numerous cafés and everyday encounters. Conceived as the new “representative” artery, it was to become a symbol of the development of the Argentine capital. The aim was the creation of a grand salon for the city, one in which the different national powers – executive, legislative, and judicial – could exhibit themselves and observe each other in carriages and at social events that made up the cosmopolitan life of Buenos Aires. The urban reform revolving around the opening of the boulevard created an experience of the metropolis in which everything and everybody were on display. It was a place from which a homogenizing modern gaze on the city was generated.

The Avenida served as the main stage for the celebrations of the Centenary, inspiring literary representations that produced a scenographic experience of the city (Codebò 2015: 8). Buenos Aires had been nonetheless the subject of literary depiction long before. It appeared as a determinant element in the plot of pivotal books of Argentine literature since Esteban Echeverría’s *El matadero*, written toward the end of the 1830s and published posthumous in 1871, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo* (1845), José Mármol’s *Amalia* (1851), and Lucio Vicente López’s *La gran aldea* (1884). However, these nineteenth-century renditions in which the city was transitioning akin López’s “*gran aldea*,”

from an “*aldea*,” a village, to being “*gran*,” great and more European like, were all influenced by a sinister image of Buenos Aires.

On the contrary, 1910 marked a shift from an image of the capital as a place of corruption and violence to a city that echoing the purposes of the boulevard was constantly on display in an attempt to expose everything. This was particularly true in the numerous travelogues written at the time to praise the efforts of the landowning oligarchy in modernizing the capital. For the Centenary of 1910 was, for the elite, a key opportunity for exhibiting Buenos Aires both to national representatives and to various illustrious Latin American and European guests. Invited by the government to the celebrations, the guests who visited the city in that year or in the immediately preceding and succeeding years included Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, Anatole France, Georges Clemenceau, the inventor of the radio Guglielmo Marconi, Guglielmo Ferrero and Gina Lombroso Ferrero, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, Jules Huret, and many others.

Enrique Gómez Carrillo’s *El encanto de Buenos Aires* (1914) renders particularly well the way in which the urban and its literary representation mutually affect each other. A multifaceted Guatemalan author, journalist, literary critic, and diplomat, Gómez Carrillo, as an official visitor of the Centenary, was a witness to the birth of the consumer culture that he saw pass before his eyes on his walks along the luxurious Avenida de Mayo. Supported by the governments of the countries that he visited, Gómez Carrillo was a defender of modernity, exponent of *modernismo*, and friend of the renowned Rubén Darío, although not without disagreements. Following the trails of modernity from Egypt to Greece and Japan to Buenos Aires, he reported on it avidly.

In *El encanto de Buenos Aires*, Gómez Carrillo employs a panoramic gaze, replicating the bird’s-eye view on the Avenida de Mayo of many photographs of the time (Fig. 1). The boulevard was consecrated as the space from where you could look onto the urban, encompassing it all into one image. His prose recreated such an image through its frenetic rhythm and its tendency to see everything as if placed in display windows: “its

rhythms, dear to the futurists, are made of the roars of automobiles, the steps of horses on asphalt, and the distant ringing of trams that pass in the neighboring streets” (24). As he sat in a café on the Avenida de Mayo, this luminous modernity, hungry for speed, light, and power, enveloped the reporter’s writing in a vortex animated by the desire of newness.

Much like the *flâneur* who strolls through the pages of Baudelaire’s *Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Gómez Carrillo was interested in finding, in the Buenos Aires of 1910, all the fantasies that made up modernity. Absorbed by the modern enchantment of the metropolis, the traveler’s disciplining gaze was devoid of the disenchanted and critical observation that characterizes, for example, the *flânerie* practiced by Walter Benjamin in the *Passagen-Werk*. Gómez Carrillo was establishing a way of approaching the city as a display, a parade of cars, people, shops, hotels, and cafés as he elaborates in the later article “La psicología del viaje” (1919) (Gómez Carrillo 2004), where he states that what interests him “is the street life with its elegant vertigo, the perpetual procession of cars allowing you to see [...] the luxury of its shops, of its hotels (47–48).”

There were, nevertheless, cracks in the metropolitan experience of fast progress, which contributed to the urban reform of the opening of the Avenida de Mayo (Liernur and Silvestri 1993: 79; Scobie 1974). Historiographic sources, such as James Scobie’s cultural study of the formation of Buenos Aires between 1870 and 1910, reveal how in the *centro-norte* zone, which stretched from the Plaza and Avenida de Mayo to Recoleta, the mansions of Buenos Aires’ elite coexisted with the worst settlements of urban poverty. According to Scobie, between Paseo de Julio (today Avenida Leandro Alem) and the Avenida Córdoba – that is, six blocks away from the Plaza de Mayo – lays Buenos Aires’s major poor settlement of *turcos* (Lebanese, Syrians, or anyone from the Near East). As the visitor moved along the railroad lines northward toward Retiro, he could see in one view squatter shacks near the tracks and riverbank and the elite homes located on a slight rise to the west along Avenida Alvear. Still farther to the northwest, beyond Palermo

**Buenos Aires, 1910  
Centenary of the Nation,  
Fig. 1** Image of the  
Avenida de Mayo. Archive  
*Caras y Caretas*, August  
16, 1911. (Source: Archivo  
General de la Nación)



Park, laid another slum, the Bajo Belgrano, which rivaled the Barrio de las Ranas on the south side, for wretchedness and disease (30). The itinerary described by Scobie (in addition to the excursions to the southern working-class neighborhood of La Boca) was the classic tour taken by travelers who visited the capital at the turn of the century. It was also the urban area that captured the attention of Gómez Carrillo. The contrast present in the dwellings that made up the *centro-norte* zone is evident in the historian's description, which reveals an urban fabric of compact spaces where a poverty with prevalently migratory roots interrupted the continuity of the city.

Considering the unevenness described by Scobie, it is surprising to read Gómez Carrillo asking himself while he walked through the central Plaza San Martín: "where are the wretched, the unemployed, the defeated in the fight for life? I do not see them. And this alone is enough to give the city a fortunate aspect, one of well-being and happiness which is not seen in any other part of the world" (268). Poverty, in as much as it was a social problem, appeared not to exist in the Buenos Aires of the Centenary. That is, in the Buenos Aires created in the Avenida de Mayo and in the urban practice, Gomez Carrillo was crafting in his chronicles published as articles in

the Argentine newspaper *La Nación* before taking the shape of a book. When Gómez Carrillo was taken on a tango tour through the streets of La Boca, his reaction was one of astonishment (Montaldo 2016: 172). "It is a distant barrio, sordid and almost deserted. On the ground, full of water, the rare light of the public lamps reflects with a spectral pallor. On the sidewalks, or rather footpaths, we walked, jumping over puddles, the three guests of the man who best knew the suburban slums" (213). The language loaded with references to the fast rhythm of progress when describing the Avenida de Mayo, here on the contrary, employs attributes that refer to a theatrical backstage, a "distant, sordid and almost deserted" atmosphere. One had to go to the outskirts, to the edges of the river to discover the creatures who were materially the lowest in Buenos Aires. There one could find "strange" beings who lived in "spectral" spaces and who remind us of what might be the cemetery of humanity, a desert place not for lack of inhabitants, but for lack of lights.

The city's outskirts acted as an exception in the panoramic gaze that informed the reporter's urban practice. Despite his excursion to the *porteño* slums, the journalist writes that "the street life, which in the rest of the world contains a large



**Buenos Aires, 1910 Centenary of the Nation, Fig. 2** Harry Olds, *The Chicken Seller*: Buenos Aires, 1901. (Source: Archivo General de la Nación)

share of sordid and dirty beings,” doesn’t have, in Buenos Aires, a single poor aspect (268). In this way the oligarchic urban experience according to which the poor did not walk the street is created on the literary level. If they existed, they lived in delimited territories; obscure zones, like the compact poverty Scobie describes; or the banks of the river to which the journalist went in search of a more wretched spectacle, as if he were going to the circus to admire animals between bars.

Gómez Carrillo’s homogenizing gaze was not the consequence of a lack in the observational capacities of the writer, but it was rather the gaze of a city, Buenos Aires, product and producer of the spectacularization of the citizens’ environment. Gómez Carrillo was, in this sense, a fervent hunter of modernity. What he sought was not the soul of countries, but rather, in his words, “something more frivolous, more useful, more picturesque, more poetic, and more positive: sensation.” He thus imposed on the places he visited the same fanatical vision of progress (“La psicología del viaje” 265) (Gómez Carrillo 2004). The aesthetic

of sensation determines that when the lower echelons of society did enter the traveler’s urban experience, they could only do it as fictional characters, rather than human beings. Thus, they were like “the heroes in the *One Thousand and One Nights*” (271). The poor could circulate in the boulevard’s scenography as means of amusement.

Ultimately, the experience of a Buenos Aires on display included also its poorest sectors, which were exhibited either on tours, as the one Gómez Carrillo took to the working-class neighborhood of La Boca, or on the streets. This is even more compelling in the Harry Olds’ (1869–1943) photographs of the time.

Official photographer of the landowning oligarchy Olds dedicated himself to immortalizing the rural festivals and the Argentine crowd, the buildings and the streets of Buenos Aires, as well as a series of popular types: chorizo sellers, nomadic fishermen, knife sharpeners, cake sellers, cigar sellers, organ grinders, and many other itinerant laborers. What we read in Olds’ photographs, as is the case of the chicken seller (Fig. 2), is most of all the employment of the staging and categorization of his subjects as a subsequent element of the city envisioned as a theatrical setting. Staged photographs and portraits were the dominant styles of the moment due to the long exposure time needed for the camera, but in the context of Buenos Aires, it reveals a desire to document, to typify the reality of the city without denouncing or emphasizing the drama of the poor.

The point was to produce “Argentine Scenes,” documents of the progress of Avenida de Mayo or the misery of itinerant sellers. Both shared the same space even in the collections of photographs that Olds sold to postcard editors, creating an image of Buenos Aires that could be sent to the rest of the country or abroad. In the first Argentine postcards, and especially in those of Olds, scenes of poverty coexisted without apparent conflict with others of streets where ladies and gentlemen of the haute-bourgeoisie used to walk. For the dominant culture of the period, the vast differences seemed natural and not embarrassing. In this sense, a back-and-forth relation is established between the aesthetic representation of the poor and the predominant urban practice. The photos of

Olds, then, much like the text of Gómez Carrillo, contributed to producing an image of the city as a homogeneous territory, in which poverty did not constitute a social problem so much as one of the city's scenic element.

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