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Opinion – Argentinian President Alberto Fernandez’s Diplomatic Mishap Amidst Crisis

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FRANCO LAGUNA CORREA, JUL 13 2021

During a recent trip to Argentina, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez met President Alberto Fernandez at La Casa Rosada (Argentina’s Government House) with two main goals in his agenda. First, support Fernandez’s government regarding the donation of more than twenty million vaccines to Argentina. And, second, serve as a diplomatic liaison to renegotiate Argentina’s debt with the IMF – the conditions of which the COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened. In an attempt to express his gratitude, President Fernandez declared, supposedly quoting Mexican Nobel Prize Laureate Octavio Paz, ‘The Mexicans came from the Indians, the Brazilians came from the jungle, but we Argentines came from ships. And they were ships that came from Europe’. The statement, according to Fernandez, was aimed at strengthening and emphasizing the cultural ties between Spain and Argentina.

While many journalists and political analysts in Argentina have focused on the origin of Fernandez’s quote, some referring to Argentinian Litto Nebbia’s 1982 song ‘Llegamos de los barcos’ (*Clarín*), which includes the lyric ‘Los brasileiros salen de la selva/los mejicanos vienen de los indios/pero nosotros los argentinos/llegamos de los barcos’ (Brazilians came out of the jungle/Mexicans came out from the Indians/But we Argentinians/Arrived in the ships). No one can deny that Nebbia’s lyrics resonate with declarations made several times by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, who often expressed that ‘we Argentines are Europeans living in exile,’ which was Borges’s way to distinguish between Argentinian ‘criollos’ (Latin Americans with a European heritage) and the indigenous people from the Americas by focusing on skin coloration, ethnic phenotype, and cultural expressions. These are the deeply racialized foundations of Latin America which still prevail throughout the entire American continent.

Regardless of the exact origin and intention of President Fernandez’s declaration, the quote recalls a long-lasting historical debate. There isn’t any doubt that Latin America is a cultural, ethnic, and epistemological crucible. Argentina isn’t an exception, just as scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, when referring to global regions and nation-states where indigenous and Western worldviews keep colliding as the cultural and ideological byproducts of ‘a vast history and on multiple traditions of knowledge incorporating cultural views of reality, time and space’ (Smith 2021, 67).

Nevertheless, the current financial crisis that Argentina is facing has nothing to do with identity politics or leftist economic measures. It is an intrinsic consequence of the neoliberalization introduced by former President Carlos Menem in the 1990s. President Alberto Fernandez’s mishap in using the aforementioned words has compromised Argentina’s diplomatic relations with Mexico and Brazil. Moreover, Fernandez’s opposition forces, instead of throwing a rain of memes about Argentina’s passive racism, could have used this diplomatic episode as a platform of collaboration to create political spaces and social policies to bring forward a biolegitimacy program that would make more visible Argentina’s ethnic diversity.

However, regardless of Fernandez’s mishap, the fundamental question, in a country like Argentina that is considered the proudest heir of Europe in Latin America, remains as follows: If Argentina’s political status-quo, with the leading political parties Frente de Todos (‘Everybody’s Front,’ which is President Fernandez party) and Juntos por el Cambio (‘Together for Change’) are willing to overtake such biolegitimacy issues at the congressional level. In addition, since President Alberto Fernandez quoted Litto Nebbia’s song, Argentinian celebrities are taking the opportunity to

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express a nationalist and partisan pride for Argentina's diversity, which is only deepening the lack of trust in Fernandez's administration.

Notwithstanding Fernandez's diplomatic mishap, in times of record high debt levels, lack of confidence in the political system, and the COVID-19 crisis, iconic Argentinian rock star Fito Paez's 1999 performance in La Casa Rosada of his famous song 'La Casa Desaparecida' delivers a better depiction of Argentina's present reality. Paez's song, which young Argentinians have elevated to the status of a national anthem, contains the lyrics 'Argentina, Argentina/What happened in Argentina/The missing house/Argentina, Argentina/Where everything is a lie, Argentina, the missing one/Welcome to everybody's house/The missing house/Welcome to exist in this world/Argentina, the missing one.' Paez couldn't hide his sarcasm while denouncing the social and economic decay brought by the once celebrated engineers of neoliberalism in Argentina, a country that slowly is indeed becoming the 'The Missing House.'

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About the author:

Franco Laguna Correa is an Interdisciplinary Research Associate at the University of Pittsburgh. Formerly, he was Assistant Professor of Latinx Cultural and Literary Studies at the University of Denver. He's published various monographs on Latin American and Mexican subjects, and various award-winning literary works. He can be followed on Twitter at @FrancoMilitia.