

The Argentine Brain Drain

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Argentina is currently experiencing a brain drain so strong that it made the headlines on Swiss television. 200 Argies, many with higher education degrees or quite a bit of professional experience, are leaving the country... *every day*. To put that in context, that's around 6'000 per month, or 70'000 per year.

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As terrible and damaging as this sounds, this is, sadly, not an unprecedented situation.

Abroad

The last Nobel Prize laureate in sciences awarded to an Argentine (medicine 1984, by Dr. César Milstein) was awarded to an Argie living abroad. There's been no other Argentine Nobel Prize ever since.

Two of the greatest writers in Argentine literature lived and passed away abroad (Jorge Luis Borges in Geneva, Julio Cortázar in Paris) after suffering censorship, condemn, and in some cases, actual threats to their life and work.

Buried in the same cemetery as Borges, Alberto Ginastera is widely considered one of the greatest musicians of the 20th century; his opera Bomarzo was censored by the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía. Martha Argerich, the best pianist in the world as I write these lines, has lived and worked outside of Argentina for the past 60 years.

Past

For more than half a century, Argentina has tried as hard as it could to push intellectuals out of the country, committing a slow institutionalized suicide. This almost imperceptible rotting process is at the root of the decadence of what was considered one of the richest and most advanced countries at the beginning of the 20th century.

And to give an example of this national suicide, let's go back to the aforementioned Juan Carlos Onganía for a bit. In July 29th, 1966, just a month after having overturned a democratic government, the *de facto* government of Onganía (dubbed the “Argentine Revolution”) decided, following the guidelines of the dictatorship workbook, that thinking people was a threat to his power. Hence, “The Night of the Long Batons” happened.

Why did Onganía physically attack professors and students, destroyed labs, burned libraries, and single-handedly ended most of Argentina's scientific progress on just one sweeping move? Because said students and professors were defending the university reform of 1918, which stated the required autonomy for universities to carry out secular education and research, free from government and religious intervention.

And, you see, that meant “communist” ideas might slip into the minds of people. God forbid sentient beings being free to discuss and analyze ideas. The very catholic General Onganía felt a divine duty to stop such madness and bring the country back to the right track.

As a result of this sadistic attack on the University of Buenos Aires, 300 professors, 200 of which were researchers, left the country and, in many cases, never returned.

This is the case of Manuel Sadosky, a mathematician and pioneer of computer science in Latin America, who built and run the first computer in the country: “Clementina”, a Ferranti Mercury computer. His daughter Cora Sadosky, who also left the country, gave her name to the Sadosky Prize, given every two years by the Association for Women in Mathematics to an outstanding young female researcher in maths.

(As an anecdote, and strangely enough, Dr. Sadosky was a childhood friend of Cortázar.)

This was not the last suicidal self-harm attack on Argentine education institutions and members thereof; suffice to mention the abominable “Night of the Pencils” of 1976, perpetrated by yet another military government, the “National Reorganization Process”, still convinced in their delusion, as always, of their divine duty to rid their country from the threat of communism.

Present

Nowadays, the reasons for those 200 argentines to leave the country every day are not political. They are not being persecuted or attacked. They simply cannot cope with rampant insecurity, lack of research infrastructure, explosive inflation, an outstandingly stupid and regressive tax system, a ridiculously complex bureaucracy system, a decaying health apparatus, and more. I understand them.

Actually, now that I think about it, of the 30 people in my high school class in

1990, I know of at least 10 who moved to another country in the past 30 years. Some have returned (I have, for a short while, 1998-2001) but most are still abroad.

Around 22 years ago I tried to teach a friend from Argentina some basic concepts of computer science. Among those was that of a “process”; precisely the one concept explained in the first page of the first chapter of “Structure and Interpretation of Computer Programs, Second Edition” by Abelson, Sussman, and Sussman:

We are about the study the idea of a *computational process*. Computational processes are abstract beings that inhabit computers.

As soon as I said the word “process”, he looked at me in disgust, mentioned the “National Reorganization Process” of 1976, and walked away. His family and friends had been persecuted, merely 20 years before our meeting, and some of them had disappeared, never to be found again.

There’s still a great deal of pain in the country around what happened in the last 50 years. Everything is very fresh, to the point where people are still being threatened and effectively kidnapped and assassinated by far right groups.

Future

Speaking about economic development (and, as it happens, computers in general) in such an environment is simply not possible. The steps in the “Maslow pyramid of needs” of a society must be taken gradually, from bottom to top, and such conditions are not in place at the moment, and haven’t been for half a century.

And for sure, it is not the classical neoliberal recipe of taking more debt, reducing government spending, or another of those classic ideas floating around economic circles that will bring Argentina back on its feet.

The key to doing that consists in stopping everything, dropping the “macho, tango, & football” attitude, asking for forgiveness for all the destruction caused, and understanding that one cannot build a country just with crops and excellent meat. It takes education, and with it, the development of culture, literature, cinema, all of the arts, *together* with science and technology, to build a nation. Those are the major pillars, the ones that generate wealth in the long run.

There are countries who have rebuilt themselves from scratch. It can be done. But it takes 30+ years, and thus, a commitment to having at least eight (8) successive democratically chosen governments sharing the same vision, with continuity, strength, wisdom, and faith.

But this is, precisely, the hardest part for a country like Argentina.