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"Basically Intelligent:" The Blind, Intelligence, and Gender in Argentina, 1880-1939

Rebecca Ann Ellis

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**"BASICALLY INTELLIGENT:" THE BLIND, INTELLIGENCE, AND GENDER
IN ARGENTINA, 1880-1939**

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

History

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DEDICATION

To my father for his love of history,

My mother for her positive energy,

Julian my partner,

and

Rory my motivation

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation examines the links between disability, intellectuality, labor and gender in Argentina between 1887 and 1939. It demonstrates how intellectual capacity and education created distinctions between the blind and other disabled populations. Those distinctions helped organizations for the blind acquire private and public resources for projects designed to make the blind independent through occupational training. However, the same arguments that aided organizations drove debates over the definition of independence for the blind. Sighted activists believed education would diminish the dependency of the blind on their families and social services through the sale of small crafts. Blind leaders believed that education would create self-sufficiency through access to well-paid and dignified labor.

Debates about education were contemporary with the rise of international medical theories about heredity that informed political debates on social policy. These theories labeled the intellectually and mentally disabled as particularly dangerous to national health. Blind activists hoped that by securing the idea that the blind were intellectually

normal, they could secure blind men dignified employment. What constituted dignified labor was, however, contested. Conservative activists argued that any work that allowed blind men to provide for their family was dignified. Activists with connections to the left argued that only jobs in which the blind competed with the sighted, and were accepted as equals, represented dignified employment. The conflict between these two viewpoints drove the expansion of institutes for the blind but also divided relatively scarce resources. Once sparked, debate about the direction and purpose of programs for the blind continued until the creation of a comprehensive institute in 1939.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Vicenta Castro Cambón.....	1
Blindness in Argentina.....	6
Institutions for the Blind in the United States and Europe.....	10
Heredity, Intellectuality, and Blindness.....	15
Comparative Disability History.....	25
Sources and Archives.....	31
Organization.....	34
Conclusion.....	37
CHAPTER 2: "POR AMOR DE DIOS:" BLINDNESS AND INSTITUTIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.....	38
Introduction.....	38
Blindness and Disability Before Specialized Institutions.....	44
Ophthalmology and Blindness.....	55
Institutional Models in Europe and the United States.....	63
The Thomas Drysdale School for the Blind, 1884-1885.....	65
Conclusions.....	76
CHAPTER 3: "THE MAN SHOULD MANDATE:" BLINDNESS, AUTHORITY, AND THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND.....	79
Introduction.....	79

Years of Frustration.....	83
Francisco Gatti: The Italian.....	89
Nationalization.....	100
Gatti's Response.....	106
Erasure.....	112
The Mendoza Project.....	113
Conclusion.....	121
CHAPTER 4: "MUCHACHOS I SMELL A RAT:" STUDENTS ON STRIKE AT THE INC.....	126
Introduction.....	126
Imagining the Blind: The Press and the Image of Blindness.....	130
Daily Life at the INC: A Mixed Model of Service.....	137
La Fraternal.....	142
The 1917 Student Strike.....	145
Images of Blindness v. Student Actions.....	151
Bartolomé Ayrolo's Investigation.....	152
Conclusions.....	164
CHAPTER 5: "THEY ARE GENERALLY INTELLIGENT:" BLINDNESS, EUGENICS, AND BLIND LEADERSHIP IN THE 1920s.....	166
Introduction.....	166
Blind Leadership in the 1920s.....	171
Hereditary Theories, Intellectuality, and Blindness.....	178
Cultural Production, Intellectuality, and Services for the Blind.....	186

Conclusions.....	199
CHAPTER 6: "STRUGGLING IN SEARCH OF SUNLIGHT:" GENDER, LABOR, AND THE DIVERSIFICATION OF INSTITUTIONS FOR THE BLIND.....	202
Introduction.....	202
Hogar para Ciegos "Vicenta Castro Cambón".....	207
The Colonia Agrícola e Industrial para Ciegos.....	218
Instituto e Asilo "Román Rosell".....	228
Conclusions.....	242
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS.....	244
An Epilogue.....	251
REFERENCES.....	257

Introduction

Vicenta Castro Cambón

Vicenta Castro Cambón was born in the city of Morón outside of the Federal Capital of Argentina. She was the younger of her parents' two children, and when she was born her physical body and sensorial capacities were normal. When she was two years old she fell down a flight of stairs in the family home. The injury resulted in a permanent twisting of her spine that affected her mobility and the appearance of her body. When she was six years old an epidemic of smallpox swept through Morón, and Vicenta contracted a high fever that resulted in blindness and partial deafness. When she was eleven, her mother died and her father remarried shortly after. Unwilling or unable to care for the girl, Cambón's step-mother took her to the *Asilo de Huérfanos* (Orphan's Asylum) of the *Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital* (The Capital City Beneficence Society, hereafter SBC), claiming that she was a twelve year old orphan. At the asylum Cambón learned to read and write Braille in the classroom for the blind. According to her biographer and friend, Alberto Larran de Vere, Cambón, loved her time at the orphanage where she established a community and developed a love and a reputation for her poetry. De Vere noted, "How pleasant was the life in [the Asilo de Huérfanos]! She passed through those patios in the company of her schoolmates."¹

Eventually the asylum decided that Cambón was too accomplished to remain at the institution and contacted her family to insist that she return to them. Cambón's biographer emphasized that after her departure from the asylum, Cambón was determined

¹ Alberto Larran de Vere, *Vicenta Castro Cambón, su vida y su obra* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos "La Continental," 1928), 6. *¡Qué agradable era la vida en él! Discurría por los patios en compañía de sus condiscípulas.*

not to be a burden to her family. Despite her mobility limitations she insisted on maintaining the family garden, doing domestic tasks in the home, and writing poetry. After moving home, she maintained contact with the blind community in Buenos Aires and was a founding member of the short-lived *Asociación Luis Braille* (Louis Braille Association) in 1915 and the *Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos* (Argentine Library for the Blind, hereafter BAC) in 1924. Her first book of poetry was also published in 1924, and Cambón's reputation as a poet began to grow outside of the blind community. As a writer she established important links to artists, journalists, and other writers that became important advocates for the burgeoning community surrounding the BAC. In her spare time she lobbied door to door to raise funds for the organization and taught Braille literacy to those who requested such training. As she aged, however, Cambón's physical condition worsened, and she died in her forties in 1928.

Some of the details of Vicenta Castro Cambón's life reflected the lives thousands of unnamed and undocumented blind individuals whose stories and experiences form the backdrop to this narrative. Her physical disabilities occurred after birth through disease and accident. Nineteenth and early twentieth century ophthalmologists argued that this was typical in most cases of blindness in Argentina. Her family was of modest means, and her ability to remain with them relied heavily on the care of the primary domestic figure in the home, her mother. When her mother passed away, new domestic arrangements meant that new provisions were made for her care. Vicenta's experience of family life, passing to institutional life, and back again to family life reflected the shifting circumstances and surprising mobility of the blind population in the lower socio-economic sectors of society. Blindness, for many if not most, was often a fragile process

of negotiation between formal and informal structures of aid and assistance. When informal arrangements between family and friends collapsed or street labor such as begging or selling failed to produce the necessary income, the blind turned to hospitals, asylums, orphanages, and invalid homes for aid. These institutions provided temporary resources to weather difficult periods but rarely offered any mechanisms to prevent future crises.

Unlike so many others, however, when Vicenta entered the orphanage in Buenos Aires she joined a small cohort of blind men and women who, through the classroom at the Asilo de Huérfanos, learned to read and write in Braille. That experience, perhaps more than any other in her life, set her on a very different path from the majority of the blind population in the country. Through that classroom she formed contacts and a community with whom she established a name for herself as a poet and as a leader in the drive to resolve the problems facing the blind population. For many of the blind of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Argentina, if we know their names at all it is from an entry in a hospital record or records at the *Asilo de Mendigos* (Beggar's Asylum). We know about Vicenta because she published poems, because she taught classes for the blind, and because after her death she became a symbol of the blind cause to her colleagues. Cambón made a career for herself both in the fields of blind education and in literature. She not only sustained herself, but also improved the fortunes of her family. Specialized education for the blind had a profound impact on Cambón and as a result she committed her life to extending that education to other blind individuals. However, the creation of specialized institutions for the blind in Argentina was impacted by often-conflicting ideas about the meaning of blindness and its place in Argentine society. Those

conflicts at times created barriers and at other times generated opportunities for blind leaders like Cambón who sought to direct and define the meaning of those institutions.

This dissertation makes three claims about the process of institutionalization for the blind and its affect on broader Argentine history. First, I argue that approaches to institutionalization were divided between sighted liberal reformers and blind leaders. Between 1880 and 1916, these two groups made the same claims about what education and social services could do for the blind. Each group asserted that liberal education using special techniques and technology would lead to independence for blind individuals in society. During this early period, both groups believed that they were working toward the same goals and that they perceived blindness in the same way. However, as the institutionalization process unfolded it became clear that sighted liberal reformers defined independence for the blind differently than blind leaders. They categorized independence as freedom of movement, freedom from intense daily care, freedom of leisure, and the ability to offset their upkeep. Sighted reformers, in other words, equated independence with a reduction in dependency. In contrast, blind leaders defined independence as economic self-sufficiency, the ability to form and provide for family, and complete social and political integration. When the differences between the two approaches became clear, conflict erupted between the two sides in the form of a student strike at the *Instituto Nacional para Ciegos* (National Institute for the blind, hereafter INC) in 1916.

My second claim is that blind leaders who wanted economic self-sufficiency for the blind were conflicted over how to achieve that goal. At the core of these debates were definitions of blind masculinity and the question of dignified labor. Male education and labor were the cornerstones of most efforts at institutionalization during the period

examined. For sighted advocates, adult male dependency was an unacceptable condition because it absorbed valuable resources that might be applied elsewhere. Female dependency was less problematic because women were expected to be dependent on either family or in its absence an institution. As a result, blind leaders saw blind men as the key group through which equality for the blind would be achieved. It was, therefore, crucial to blind leaders to secure for blind men dignified employment. Leaders, however, were divided over the definition of dignified labor. Conservative blind leaders rooted the idea of dignity in the role of the male head of house. Any work that allowed a blind man to provide for a family was considered acceptable by conservative calculations. This allowed conservative blind leaders to push to legitimize street work, such as selling cigarettes, newspapers, or candies. This work was often associated with mendicancy and blind individuals who performed such tasks were frequently subject to police harassment as a result. Leftist leaders disliked street work because of its association with begging and because it was not conducted equally by the sighted. For work to be dignified, leftist blind leaders demanded that blind workers be integrated alongside sighted workers for equal pay and hired at equal rates.

Despite their differences, blind and sighted leaders alike used education, culture, and intelligence to distinguish the blind from "unfit" disabled populations in order to generate greater interest in the blind as a population worthy of state and private resources. Cultural production was an important component of blind propaganda because Argentines placed a high level of importance on intellectual and mental health. Historical analysis of eugenics and positivism typically discuss disability in this period as an easy aggregate that allowed all disability groups to be discussed together under the same

rubric. My research challenges that assumption by showing how blind and sighted leaders alike differentiated the blind from other disability groups by emphasizing the intellectual prowess and cultural acumen of the blind. Further, the ophthalmological medical community, who were keen to demonstrate that they successfully eradicated hereditary blindness from Argentina, reinforced these social distinctions. Ophthalmologists claimed that in Argentina cases of hereditary blindness were so rare that they did not warrant significant examination or discussion.

Blindness in Argentina

Though this project is not the first to analyze disabled populations in Latin America, it is one of the first to do so explicitly through a framework of disability analysis. Unlike projects that place the state or culture at the core of their discussion of mental health facilities or public health projects, my research places disability at the center. It examines how debates regarding the place of disabled bodies within society shaped rhetorical and lived experiences of work, family, and nation in Argentina in the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Through the lens of state and private services for the blind in Buenos Aires, my work shows how the discursive construction of capacity shaped broader processes of state formation, social reform and gender relations. In doing so, my work begins to map the contours of Argentine discussions about the value of particular bodies over others in extension of discourses about gender and race. It articulates the way discourses about disability, especially those about intellectual and mental capacity, helped to justify social exclusion of non-disabled groups.

Specialized services for specific populations, such as the blind, began to develop in Argentina in the late nineteenth century under the auspices of sighted liberals from the urban professional classes. These liberals were seeking to modernize Argentina's social infrastructure in the wake of decades of violent political conflict that positioned conservative provincial authorities against Buenos Aires liberals. After consolidating their authority in the 1860s, these liberal professionals sought to reorganize and discipline populations within the country that they deemed barbaric, backward, or degenerate. They drew on positivist ideals that proposed that society should be organized into appropriate spheres so that scientific principles could be applied to non-productive or disruptive portion of the population in order to convert them into modern citizens. Blind institutions joined hospitals, asylums, orphanages, and poorhouses, which all sought to create scientific spaces specifically for populations they housed. Special education institutes for the blind were intended to transform the lives of blind individuals by converting them from absolute dependents of either their families or the state, to individuals capable of labor that ameliorated the cost of their own dependence to the state and society.

The blind proved to be a more difficult population to order and control than early organizers of institutions initially anticipated. The principles of positivism held the blind to be inferior, but even at the earliest school for the blind, the majority of educators willing to work in blind institutions in Argentina were themselves blind. Fin de siècle positivists asserted that blindness caused inferiority, but the presence of blind educators and intellectuals in blind schools forced cycles of reevaluation of the capacities of the blind. Ultimately, sighted advocates came to believe that the blind retained all the intellectual capacities of the sighted, but were physically inferior both in terms of

mobility and strength. These shifting understandings of the capacity of blind individuals created openings for a small but influential group of blind leaders to assert a more dominant role for themselves in the construction of institutions for the blind. They used Argentine anxieties about intelligence and heredity to reinforce the idea that blindness, and therefore the blind community, did not pose a threat to the national body politic. In doing so they laid bare social attitudes about intelligence and mental capacity rooted in the anxieties of professionals who wanted to solidify Argentina's place among the modernized nations.

Nineteenth century liberal positivists did not need to define blindness as it appeared to them as obvious. It was not until the twentieth century that Argentine ophthalmologists began to engage in European debates about what kinds of sight actually constituted blindness. To this day blindness has never reached a level of universal definition in the Argentine context.² Ophthalmologists during this period attempted to quantify levels of eyesight but were consistently thwarted by the reality that what constituted healthy sight was often subject to what one was trying to see. For example, an individual with one eye can see objects and color quite clearly but they lack depth perception. Argentine doctors attempted to make it illegal for individuals with one eye to drive vehicles, effectively making them legally blind in the context of driving. Outside of medical journals there were few attempts to codify or clearly identify how definitions of blindness were reached. Individuals entering institutions did not undergo examinations designed to prove that they were in fact blind. Staff simply asked at intake when sight

² For debates regarding welfare in Argentina see, Susana Belmartino, *La atención médica Argentina en el siglo XX: Instituciones y procesos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores Argentina, 2005); and Donna J. Guy, *Women Build the Welfare State: Performing Charity and Creating Rights in Argentina, 1880-1955* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). Within global contexts, medical definitions and legal definitions became important via the implementation of varying levels of broad social welfare programs. Argentina did not implement a broad based and centralized social welfare system during the period of my study.

was lost and why. Blindness operated for the staff and administrators as an obvious state of dependency resulting from the inability to perform in a sighted world.³

The experience of blindness is equally difficult to discuss in universal terms. Like many disabilities, experiences of blindness are intimately connected to identity. The individuals in this story who form the core leadership of the blind community all lost their sight at a young age. Most had few memories of their life before their loss of sight. They all attended primary school at schools for the blind and they all read and wrote in Braille. Their shared experiences as blind individuals drew them together into a recognized community. Gender, ethnicity, and class, however, divided even their experiences, but because they wrote about their experiences we know more about them. Less prominent in this study are the blind individuals who lost their sight later in life as the result of accidents or age. Sight lost later in life was more often experienced as a tragic rupture or loss. Learning Braille or training in a blind occupation, would have likely been a very different experience for these individuals. Blindness that resulted from age is the least discussed form of blindness in this work. The elderly blind often had far fewer options for survival. Blindness could be a very isolating experience, and few of the institutions discussed here placed any emphasis on aiding the elderly blind. Blindness was often seen as a natural condition of age rather than an aberration. Only towards the end of this period were any attempts made to teach the elderly blind to read or to help them secure safe accommodations designed for their specific needs.

³ For further discussion regarding the conceptualization of blindness see, Frances A. Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness in America* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976); Simon Hayoe, *God, Money, and Politics: English Attitudes to Blindness and Touch, from the Enlightenment to Integration* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2008); Zina Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); and G.A. Phillips, *The Blind in British Society: Charity, State, and Community, 1780-1930* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2004).

The community of blind leaders that developed in Argentina may all have learned to read and write in Braille, but Braille was not, nor has it ever been, the only system of raised type legible to the blind. Since Braille's invention and continuing to the present, embossed alphabetic type competed with Braille as a mode of written communication. Embossed type was particularly appealing to those who lost their sight after learning to read Spanish with Latin lettering because they typically found it easier than transitioning to Braille symbols. In Argentina, Braille was the preferred mode of writing and instruction in most educational institutions, but as late as the 1940s it appears that Braille literacy was extremely low. In some provinces only two to three individuals out of an average of about five hundred blind individuals were literate in Braille.⁴ The majority of blind individuals in Argentina during the period under study used embossed type documents, reading assistants, audio books, or radio. In the 1930s, radio became a coveted means by blind leaders of reaching blind individuals in the provinces. Braille documents composed between 1880 and 1955, must therefore be understood as reaching a limited segment of the Argentine population. Sighted family members, as part of campaigns to memorialize those individuals, later transcribed the few letters that I have written by blind people in Braille.

Institutions for the Blind in the United States and Europe

Argentine institutions for the blind were predominately educational in nature. This reflected Enlightenment origins of institutions for the blind and their relationship the

⁴ For sample studies see, Juan Alvarez, *Investigaciones sobre ciegos en la Provincia de Santa Fe*, Instituto Social Seccion Publicaciones (Santa Fe, Argentina: Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 1932); and Amalio Olmos Castro, *Investigaciones sobre ciegos en la Provincia de Santiago del Estero* (Santiago del Estero, Argentina: Empronta Amoroso, 1936).

spread of liberal education. In 1688, the Irish politician William Molyneux sent a letter to John Locke outlining a thought puzzle that would become a key point of discussion between philosophers for the next several centuries. Molyneux asked Locke:

A Man, being born blind, and having a Globe and a Cube, nigh of the same bignes, Committed into his Hands, and being taught or Told, which is Called the Globe, and which the Cube, so as easily to distinguish them by his Touch or Feeling; Then both being taken from Him, and Laid on a Table, Let us Suppose his Sight Restored to Him; Whether he Could, by his Sight, and before he touch them, know which is the Globe and which the Cube? Or Whether he Could know by his Sight, before he stretch'd out his Hand, whether he Could not Reach them, tho they were Removed 20 or 1000 feet from Him? [sic]⁵

The question became known as "Molyneux's Problem," and throughout the Enlightenment prominent philosophers such as Rousseau, Diderot, and Voltaire tried to analyze and resolve this question regarding sensorial perception. In attempting to solve the puzzle philosophers like Diderot hypothesized that education for the blind could expand their comprehension of the world around them. By the late eighteenth century, French philanthropist and Diderot's contemporary Valentin Haüy drew on Diderot's suggestion to found the first school for the blind in Paris, France in 1784.

The first schools for the blind in Europe and the United States opened as discussions about the problem of poverty converged with expansion of liberal education. In northern countries the number of people who teetered on the brink of indigence grew

⁵ See, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2014), s.v. "Molyneux's Problem" (Marjolein Degenaar and Gert-Jan Lokhorstat), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/molyneux-problem/> (accessed 08/25/2015); Richard Slayton French, *The Education of the Blind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1924) <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/21726837.html> (accessed, 03/06/2014); and Hayhoe, *God, Money, and Politics*. This thought experiment is today known as "Molyneux's Problem." Molyneux's question likely resulted from the increasing number of successful cataract surgeries performed by surgeon barbers in the 17th century and 18th century after the rediscovery of an effective and ancient method of removing the cataract. Reports of miraculous recovery of sight after a lifetime blind were a sensation among the literate of Europe during this period.

rapidly alongside industrialization. Solutions to poverty ranged from reliance on charitable organizations to modest state initiatives intended to provide aid to only the deserving poor. The deserving poor were categorized as those who were less desirable in the industrial free market. This included children, the disabled, and women. The blind were frequently singled out as being the most deserving of the deserving poor.⁶ However, as the century progressed liberal elites became more concerned about the effect of charitable giving on the characters of the recipients. They surmised that the act of receiving aid corrupted the characters of the poor or that the disabled might fake their condition, feign that it was worse than it was, or even hurt themselves in order to avoid work. As elites became more convinced that the lower classes did not in fact desire to work and therefore were prone to seek charity where possible, solutions to grapple with poverty became more draconian.⁷

In England, the solution took the form of the New Poor Law passed in 1834, which exemplified the Enlightenment approach to social problems. The New Poor Law created the workhouse system, a system designed to be a deterrent to poverty for all who entered. Conditions within the poorhouse were intended to be dehumanizing to discourage the "lazy" from descending into poverty. However, the workhouses were institutions for the able bodied that were part of a system of institutions intended to confine the poor on the basis of their specific needs. The asylum, the hospital, and the orphanage all served to group and categorize the poor by their needs and then place them in institutions that would convert them from dependents on society to independent actors.

⁶ Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

⁷ Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability*, trans. William Sayers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Deborah A. Stone, *The Disabled State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); and Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

Similar systems appeared in the United States in a wide variety of municipalities through the introduction of what historians later labeled the "ugly laws." The ugly laws made it illegal for disabled or ill people to beg in the street and allowed police to arrest them and place them in the "proper" institution.⁸ Increasingly, Northern European countries and the United States turned to specialized institutions to confine, categorize, and discipline problematic populations.

Northern elites who sought to cure their country of mendicancy and indigence found schools for the blind to be an ideal solution for a portion of the problem. The liberal male professionals who opened and ran institutions for the blind believed they preformed a beneficial service for the individuals in residence as well as for the society in which they lived.⁹ They reasoned that if mendicants threatened the economic health of the nation, then the blind were one of the most dangerous categories of mendicants because they were the most difficult to "make useful." The education of blind children promised to resolve that problem, by teaching the blind to be useful before they became adults. In the late 1830s and into the 1840s, Samuel G. Howe made headlines with his education of the deaf-blind girl Laura Bridgman, Helen Keller's precursor. When Howe announced that he had taught Bridgman to read, write and communicate orally, it seemed almost miraculous to the reading public. The revolutionary potential of education of the blind ignited the process of creating schools for the blind across the United States and Europe. Finally, the most destitute of the destitute could be made useful.

⁸ Schwick, *The Ugly Laws*, 1-22.

⁹ See, footnote 4. In Europe and the United States institutions for the blind were overtly liberal projects because of their use of scientific education to instruct the blind. There were very few, if any, substantial institutions that were organized by religious entities. The primary exception to this was in Scotland, but even in the Scottish case, after opening the institution was quickly absorbed by the state and secularized.

Administrators at blind institutions in the United States and England quickly came to the realization that blind education was not as revolutionary as they had initially anticipated. Within a few short years it became apparent that alumni from their institutions were no more able to find viable employment than they had been prior to entering the school. The children that they educated were still vulnerable to extreme poverty and dependence on aid in adulthood. To explain this, administrators like Samuel G. Howe reasoned that they had overestimated the capacities of the blind, but refused to alter their course.¹⁰ Institutions, he argued, had to remain rigidly committed to educating children alone, lest they convert from a scientific enterprise into a charitable one.¹¹

Unlike their northern counterparts, positivist Argentine social reformers did not achieve a rigid separation of populations into specialized institutions. Despite the expansion of such institutions, reformers in Argentina competed with a number of other entities that viewed these places from a more practical perspective. The police, the judiciary, families, and other government agencies tended to view all institutions in similar ways and often ignored their scientific missions when necessity or convenience demanded. The police used asylums to deal with troublesome inmates or as halfway houses for mendicants when the prison system seemed inappropriate. Similarly, prisons often functioned as alternatives to the poor house for disabled persons when the poor house was full.

¹⁰ James W. Trent, *The Manliest Man: Samuel G. Howe and the Contours of Nineteenth-Century American Reform* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

¹¹ Ibid.

Heredity, Intellectuality, and Blindness

Maria Silvia Di Liscia categorized the global impact of positivist ideals stating, "In the middle of the nineteenth century, the result of the positivist boom was the generation of a discourse of global restructuring that attempted to justify the alleged biological inferiority of certain humans."¹² In the U.S. and Europe biological inferiority encompassed all the physical and mental deviations from the normal. While Argentine liberal positivists in the *litoral* accepted this idea in principle they tended to focus on the abnormal mind as the core biological obstacle to national progress. Positivists' concern with the mind was linked to their anxieties about the racial makeup of the country. White minds were, according to degenerative theories, intellectually superior and more stable. Inferior minds were prone to superstition, barbarism and delays, all of which obstructed civilized order and progress. As the now famous title of Domingo F. Sarmiento's opus conveyed, Buenos Aires political elites feared that a large portion of the rural racially inferior population might be prone to these barbaric tendencies.¹³

Argentine positivists' focus on mental capacity was closely associated with their desires to be recognized as equals to U.S. and European professionals in international professional organizations. To improve international impressions of Argentine mental capacities it was necessary to eradicate or control segments of the population that threatened the degeneration of those capacities. This provided justification for the eradication of indigenous populations who were considered among the lowest in the

¹² María Silvia Di Liscia, "Cuerpos para experimentar: Objectivación médica, positivismo y eliminación étnica en Argentina, 1860-1890," *Asclepio* 54, no. 1 (2002): 185. *A mediados del siglo XIX, el auge positivista tuvo como consecuencia la generación de un discurso de reestructuración del mundo por el cual se intentó justificar biológicamente la supuesta inferioridad de ciertos seres humanos.*

¹³ Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, trans. Kathleen Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

racial hierarchy of humanity.¹⁴ In contrast, blindness was, by the late nineteenth century, understood as a physical condition that did not affect the mind. Problems associated with blindness in Argentina were primarily economic or associated with problems of order in urban spaces, the unsightly beggar. Argentine positivists discussed blindness in the context of a broad campaign to organize urban spaces through the creation of modern infrastructure, rather than in the context of degeneration. This meant that the creation of institutions for the blind were not as pressing as those designed to control or contain populations viewed as mentally degenerate.

The distinction between mental degeneration and physical disability was best exemplified by the distinctions that Argentines made between the deaf and the blind. Deafness and blindness were the two most recognizable of the sensorial disabilities. In the nineteenth century, Argentine positivists accepted European theories that asserted that sign language represented a primitive form of communication. The use of sign by the deaf community, therefore, indicated mental backwardness or degeneration. Further, when deaf or partially deaf persons learned to speak the tone of their voice suggested an inferior intellect. In 1896, Emilio Coni suggested that deaf education begin using a new teaching technique that would help the deaf adopt "a more pleasing timber in their voice."¹⁵ Argentine positivists accepted this assertion and many reformers who would later appear in projects regarding blind institutions (Emilio Coni, Ulises J. Codino, Bartolomé Ayrolo, and Cecilia Grierson) all began working with the deaf population two to three decades prior to their initial forays into discussions of blindness. The *Institución*

¹⁴ Di Liscia, "Cuerpos para experimentar," 186.

¹⁵ Emilio Coni, "Dr. Emilio Coni," *La Prensa*, March 3, 1896, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 10/22/2012).

Nacional para Sordomudos (The National Institutions for Deaf-mutes) opened twenty-three years before the *Instituto Nacional para Ciegos* (National Institute for the Blind, hereafter INC). I argue that positivists saw confining and educating the deaf as more urgent because deafness was seen as mentally degenerative and could effect the intellectual health of the national populace. When the INC was finally constructed in 1908, the motivations and justifications for the project were primarily infrastructural. Legislators argued that a national institution was necessary in order to reflect the progress toward modernity already made by Argentina in the fields of education and health.

At the end of the fin de siècle, positivist ideas began to give way to new theories of heredity, like eugenics and biotypology that were more active in their approach to controlling the populace. Like the positivists before them, Argentine professionals tended to prefer theories that provided mechanisms to compartmentalize and understand society on the basis of categories. This meant that most Argentine professionals preferred biotypology, developed by Italian Nicola Pende during this period, to eugenics. Eugenics, whether of the positive Lamarkian strand or the negative Mendelian strand, tended toward broad universal categories of inferiority that could be applied to large segments of the global population. Biotypology developed a number of "types" that were based on a variety of physical and mental characteristics. For example, a broad nose, close set eyes, and a volatile personality might indicate a hereditary predisposition toward criminality and alcoholism. The reliance on individual traits grouped together allowed the physician or educator a great deal of flexibility in determining the degenerative status of an individual. However, like positivists, eugenicists and biotypologists considered mental abnormalities more fixed than other characteristics. They always signified degeneration.

Thus, when discussing mental abnormality the same physicians who preferred the flexibility of biotypology were more prone to incorporating negative policy recommendations of Mendelian eugenics into their prescriptions for addressing the intellectually or mentally disabled.

Calculations about degeneration became more complex as eugenics and biotypology grew more accepted in the medical community. Doctors began to examine links between infectious disease and race or the degenerative ramification of persons with multiple disabilities. By the 1920s, ophthalmologists associated with hereditary theory had concluded that blindness in Argentina was the product of accident or infection. Surprisingly, Argentine ophthalmologists largely ignored connections between blindness and diseases like syphilis or alcoholism that may have had a negative impact on perceptions of the blind. The greater part of ophthalmological discussions of blindness emphasized that the blind community did not represent a threat to the health of the populace. This made it an attractive cause for professionals who questioned the existence of supposedly degenerate populations. Some blind organizations in the 1920s, received significant financial boosts from organizations seeking to limit and control the Argentine populace.

Despite not being categorized as a direct threat, the blind remained vulnerable to suggestions that they were unfit for two reasons. First, while ophthalmologists argued that blindness itself was not degenerative, there was one disease associated with it that ophthalmologists targeted as a scourge in need of eradication. They argued that eye infection, specifically trachoma, was the product of racially inferior immigration to the

country from Middle and Eastern Europe.¹⁶ Thus blindness was not itself degenerative, but could reflect degeneration when presented in supposedly racially inferior individuals. Secondly, as blind organizations gained more support and began to incorporate larger numbers of blind individuals into their programs, the issue of multiple disabilities began to appear. Blind individuals with intellectual or mental disabilities threatened to create associations between blindness and mental degeneration. These links were deepened by the fact that most of these individuals were more likely to learn in an institution that taught Braille for the blind than in an institution designed to educate persons with intellectual disabilities. The unique nature of blind education meant that persons with multiple disabilities including blindness, tended to be placed in institutions for the blind.

The insidious relationship between blindness and degenerative theories during this period meant that advocates for the blind felt that they needed to constantly prove the intellectual capacities of the blind. Specifically, organizations sought to demonstrate that the blind were capable of appreciating and participating in the cultural project of the nation. The principal avenues to do this were through musical and literary production. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the word culture in Argentina had been associated with civilization, intellectual performance, and moral rectitude.¹⁷ From 1880 to 1916, helping the blind acquire culture served as the primary goal for institutions for the blind operated by the sighted. However, following a student strike at the INC in 1917 that pushed many sighted advocates out of organizing for the blind, the meaning of culture in institutions for the blind shifted. Blind leaders continued to use culture as a platform to demonstrate

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion see, María Silvia Di Liscia, "Desde fuera y desde dentro: Enfermedades, etnias, y nación (Argentina 1880-1940)," *Patologías de la patria: enfermedades, enfermos y nación en América Latina*, eds. Gilberto Hochman, María Silvia Di Liscia, and Steven Palmer (Buenos Aires: Lugar Editorial, 2012), 125-154.

¹⁷ Di Liscia, "Cuerpos para experimentar," 185.

blind intellectuality, but instead of something that had to be taught to the blind, culture became something that the blind produced. Blind leadership used the production of musical pieces, poems, stories, and articles by members of the blind community as propaganda to demonstrate the value of the blind population to the sighted. For blind leadership, culture was not the end product of blind education, as it was for sighted advocates in the nineteenth century. For blind leaders, rather, economic independence and dignified labor were the goal of education. Cultural production helped to finance and support institutions while simultaneously proving the value of the blind to the sighted.

As blind leaders rose to assume greater authority over blind education and social services in the 1920s, they began to articulate new meanings of the term "useful" in relation to the blind and blind labor. In the late nineteenth century, the idea that the blind were a useless population was associated with the image of the blind beggar. Even when the blind worked in the street selling small goods or giving performances, they were harassed or arrested as mendicants. Propaganda about education for the blind promised to make the blind useful, but until the 1920s this largely meant training young blind men as musicians and teaching blind girls to knit. Sighted advocates for the blind did not discuss whether or not these occupations were fulfilling, dignified, well paid, or met economic needs. That the educated blind were cultured and assimilated into sighted society was a higher priority. It was only after organizations influenced by socialist ideals regarding equality and justice came to power that questions about the type of employment conducted by the blind began to be discussed.

When blind leaders discussed making blind men useful, they debated the meaning of dignified labor. Vocational training programs were supposed to provide blind men

with skills that could translate into earnings substantial enough to provide for a family. However, throughout this period, blind leaders struggled to identify vocations that could be incorporated into training programs at institutions for the blind and that would lead to comfortable wages. Blind leaders worked against assertions made by sighted advocates that blind men were incapable of achieving the kind of independence associated with sighted adult masculinity. Sighted institutional directors and educators had for some time assumed that blindness created dependency and, therefore, that blind men could not achieve full adult independence. Despite their stated desire to make individuals useful men, workshop directors and school administrators rarely pursued educational programs that would provide blind men skills in fields that yielded enough income for blind men to maintain dependents. In fact, workshop programs often instructed blind men in skills such as sewing, weaving, and basketry, usually considered women's work in European and U.S. schools for the blind as well as in broader Argentine society. These jobs were often piecework and for many paid no more than a few pesos a month.

In the 1920s and 1930s, blind leaders grappled with the persistent idea that blind men would never be able to compete with sighted men for work. Even in fields accepted as ideal for blind men such as masseuses or musicians, blind men continued to experience long periods of unemployment and economic struggles that made it difficult for them to support families. Blind male leaders, all of whom worked in institutions for the blind, were almost all married to sighted women. Most had children and many supported extended families. Blind male leaders were anxious about their roles as providers in the face of economic crisis or job loss. Those anxieties were reflected in their discussions about labor opportunities for the blind. Blind women, unlike blind men, had a much more

difficult time forming normative heterosexual families. Only a few of the women in leadership positions ever married. Blind women were rarely discussed as mothers or as wives in any literature on the blind. If the blind community was going to assimilate and reflect the normative heterosexual family of the sighted community it would do so through the blind male head of house, not the blind wife and mother.

The few glimpses that we get into the lives of blind women reflect anxiety about blindness and self-sufficiency. In one of Vicenta Castro Cambón's poem titled, "¿Y qué soy sobre la tierra?," Cambón described her reactions to the blind beggar.

Next to the agony of a centuries old woman,
Piously lavishing the solace of faith,
While I am lifted from my soul by her prayer,
I see as if in a mirror, what I will be.

*Junto al lecho de agonía de una anciana centenaria,
Prodigándole piadosa los consuelos de la fe,
Mientras sube de mi alma por la suya una plegaria,
Veo como en un espejo, lo que soy lo que seré.*¹⁸

Cambón's fear that she could be the one begging in the street reflected her own awareness of the fragility of her otherwise privileged circumstances. Discussions about the usefulness of the blind generally did not include women, and there was no evidence that women ever amounted to more than a third of the population at any of the institutions for the blind examined during this period.

After her death, Vicenta Castro Cambón became a symbol of the blind cause and in doing so became the best-documented woman in this study. However, in reality, Cambón's life would have been a difficult model to follow for blind women. In the years following her death Cambón began to be described in almost saintly terminology. After

¹⁸ Vicenta Castro Cambón, "¿Y qué soy sobre la tierra?," *Rumores de mi noche* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta López, 1923), 52.

1928, descriptions of Cambón inevitably noted her self-sacrifice, humility, devotion, suffering, perseverance, and creative intelligence. Admiration for her work and accomplishments were always placed in direct comparison to her external appearance. In his opening description of her Larran stated, "I have said that her figure was paradoxical and it is true: it was necessary to have much loving mercy in your heart to evade the disconcerting impression caused by her hapless body."¹⁹ Cambón's ability to overcome physical appearance became equated with her spirituality, and descriptions often mirrored descriptions of nuns. Her biographer described her as living in a "halo of her own light."²⁰ Equating Cambón with a kind of pure spirituality marked her as abstinent. She loved and cared deeply, but that love and care was always directed to the community, to the blind. Cambón came to represent the sentiment expressed by BAC supporter and philosopher Vicente Fatone that, "the blind are closer to God than the sighted."²¹

Discussions that equated blind femininity with religious abstinence were more than figurative. In 1927, the only group exclusively available to blind women, the order of *Las Hermanas Sacramentinas no videntes*, was formed by father Roberto Rissi in Cláypole, Buenos Aires. Father Rissi claimed that in 1915 he was hearing confessions for young blind women interned at a local institution when a blind professor of the blind suggested, "The good young girls live like nuns, why does the Church not also grant them

¹⁹ Larran de Vere, *Vicenta Castro Cambón*, 1. *He dicho su figura paradójica y es verdad: era necesario tener en el corazón mucha piedad afectuosa para sustraerse a la impresión desconcertante que causaba su cuerpo desdichado.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

²¹ Vicente Fatone, "Las posibilidades de la cegura: Conferencia pronunciada el 2 de junio de 1928 en nuestro local y que ofrecemos hoy a nuestros socios remondándoles muy especialmente su lectura," *Hacia la Luz* 1, no. 6 (October, 1928): 5-6. *...los ciegos están más cerca de Dios que los videntes.*

the honor of having their souls consecrated to God."²² These women who the priest gathered into a single order were not blind nuns. They were blind women for whom the priest facilitated religious life because their lives already reflected that life. There was no question that these young women might marry on leaving the institution for the blind where they lived, nor was there a discussion of their potential to become workers. For the priest and the professor, these blind women were abstinent and without occupation as a natural result of their blindness.

Women in institutions for the blind were often treated as doubly dependent as a result of both their gender and blindness. Unlike sighted women, however, blind women could not access higher male wages through marriage. They were more likely to rely on the ongoing support of their parents or extended family than their sighted counterparts. This made them especially vulnerable later in life. Blind and sighted women, however, did share some of the same disadvantages. For example, blind individuals were legally prohibited from marrying without the written consent of a guardian, such as a doctor or family member. For men, this was a significant divergence from the rights of sighted males, who were allowed to marry at will once reaching adulthood. For women, this law did little to change their legal status, as a guardian's signature was needed for marriage regardless of whether or not a woman was blind. That said, blind women were in many ways far less visible in the documents than their sighted counterparts.

²² "Las Hermanas Sacramentinas no videntes," February 19, 2013, Lo que yo recibí: Un lugar para conocer a Don Orión y enriquecernos con su espiritualidad, <http://loqueyorecibi.blogspot.com/2013/02/las-hermanas-sacramentinas-no-videntes.html> (Accessed 06/12/2013). *Estas buenas jóvenes viven como las religiosas, ¿por qué la Iglesia no da también a ellas el mérito de las almas consagradas a Dios?*

Comparative Disability History

One of the most important things that disability theory elucidates is how physical, mental, and intellectual differences legitimized exclusionary practices. Concepts of disability are part of fundamental structures used to define the mode of participation in civil society, labor, and private life. Scholars of disability in the United States argue that dichotomies of natural versus monstrous, normal versus abnormal, and capacity versus incapacity are continually rearticulated as a means by which to expand or contract access to public services, civil rights, and economic opportunity.²³ These authors assert that, like gender, race, and ethnicity, discourses of disability elucidate the means through which power is constructed and deconstructed. As a category uniting individuals through medical-legal diagnoses of biological difference, disability is a relatively new concept, particularly in Latin America. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, vague and shifting terms such as abnormal, weak, feeble, and wretched were applied broadly to both temporary illness and permanent conditions. These distinctions were important because they allowed Argentine politicians, medical professionals, educators, and philanthropic humanists to differentiate between different populations. How services, aid, and education were distributed relied on shifting understandings of each population's place in Argentine society. By focusing on a single population we can begin to see how difference was articulated as well as continuities between different groups.

Most of the existing histories on blindness emphasize the U.S. or European context. While my work is not intended to be explicitly comparative, it engages these

²³ Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, "Introduction: Disability History from the Margins to the Mainstream," *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 3.

histories on two very specific levels. First, the world of blind institutions was very transnational and fairly small. Educational programs, teaching techniques, and institutional designs were frequently shared between actors of different nationalities through international conferences, letter writing, good will tours, and shared publications. Immigration by blind individuals from Southern Europe brought European theories about the education of the blind that conflicted with sighted advocates' preference for Northern European theories. Thus, the history of blindness in Argentina was shaped by international debates about blind education. Secondly, this research broadens the scope of disability history beyond the relatively narrow fixation on the U.S. and Europe. In doing so, it challenges some of the narratives and assumptions prevalent in the current field of disability studies.

The institutionalization of blind social services in Europe and the United States began about fifty years prior to the earliest attempts in Argentina. In the U.S. and Europe, the blind had relatively little authority in the principal blind institutions for the blind created in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The organizations that the blind did control were small and did not wield enough power to challenge institutional practices until the post war period.²⁴ In Argentina, control over the institutionalization process was contested between sighted and blind advocates. Sighted advocates were initially successful at determining the direction of the first institutions, but were never able to locate and train enough sighted experts on blindness to maintain authority. As

²⁴ Koestler, *Woeful Afflictions*; Floyd W. Matson, *Walking Alone and Marching Together: A History of the Organized Blind Movement in the United States, 1940-1990* (Baltimore: National Federation of the Blind, 1990); and Euclid J. Herie, *Journey to Independence: Blindness, the Canadian Story*, with the assistance of The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2005).

either directors or teachers, blind leaders ultimately controlled most institutions for the blind at least until the 1940s. This created a much different relationship between the organized blind community in Argentina and the process of institution building. At a time when U.S. and European disability rights groups were fighting to either control or eradicate institutions, the Argentine blind community was looking to expand them.

Historical interpretations of the institutionalization process in the United States and Europe have been deeply influenced by Foucault's analysis of the Enlightenment's effects on medical sciences. This type of analysis began in the 1970s with the rise of post-structural, feminist, and ethnic studies that began to reshape how academics thought about the organization of power, the creation of identity, and the relationship between power and identity. Michel Foucault's writings on the body, sexuality, insanity, and medicine established a common narrative about medicine and its role in the creation of identity categories that heavily influenced the study of disability. *The Birth of the Clinic*, published in translation in 1973, provided a short and concise overview of modern medicine, the most influential element of Foucault's theories in the narrative of modern disability.²⁵ In this work, Foucault deconstructed the narrative of progressive medical objectivity that appeared in the late eighteenth century and was consolidated by the early twentieth. According to Foucault, reliance on the Enlightenment ideal that truth was knowable, observable, and distinct from superstition bolstered the legitimacy of practical knowledge, or knowledge obtained through observance. The practice of clinical medicine in which a doctor observed a patient, carefully denoting symptoms and reactions to treatment, gained prestige throughout the nineteenth century and legitimized the authority

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

of the “clinical gaze.” With the rise of nosology and the discourse of progress, doctors increasingly the final arbiters of the utopian future in which disease and “abnormalities” were eradicated. As such powerful entities, doctors were granted incredible leeway to change the rules of doctor-patient interaction. The body was mechanized and the doctor became the detached mechanic allowed to touch, move, and feel in order to give name to the abnormalities that inhibited the proper function of that body. The mechanization or medicalization of the body and the naming of its disorders created whole new subject positions frequently divided into categories of normal vs. pathological. For theorists of disability, Foucault’s breakdown of the rise of the clinic suggested a fundamental connection between the rise of modern medicine and the creation of the subject position “disabled.” This basic narrative and periodization for the medicalization of the body became extremely influential in disability histories that followed and most of Foucault’s central tenets went unchallenged, regardless of cultural or temporal context.

Though Foucault's assertions about the medicalization of the body have been applied in the Argentine context, most historians of medicine now agree that medical authority in Argentina faced significant competition from other sectors of society and was never able to consolidate the same degree of authority as in the U.S. or European contexts. Rapid population increase resulting from immigration and migration strained urban social and physical infrastructures to their breaking points. Scholars of health and medicine note that this period of rapid growth marked the beginning of a process of increasing distance between Argentine reformers' demands for modernization of the country’s public health system and its actual ability to put those systems in place. Regardless of the desires of medical elites for certain legislation or funding, in the first

half of the twentieth century the Argentine state was simply too weak or too uninterested to heed many of those requests. For example, when provided an opportunity to place the decision over institutionalization of the “insane” in the hands of doctors, the legislature balked and refused to remove the final decision from the hands of family members.²⁶ Susana Belmartino concluded in her examination of the healthcare system that ambivalence toward health care and reliance on private institutions to provide health services had been a hallmark of the Argentine system since the turn of the twentieth century.²⁷

Though the medical establishment was not strong enough to impose its will on institutions for the blind, my research shows that it did not attempt to do so. Ophthalmologists in particular were only associated with blind institutions in a philanthropic capacity. A diagnosis of blindness was in many ways an end to medical intervention, rather than the beginning of an individual's medical experience. Unlike Foucault's descriptions of the relationship between psychiatry and mental illness, ophthalmologists did not seek to experiment on the blind during this period in order to hone their knowledge of the eye. Instead it was educators and administrators of blind institutions, especially those who were sighted, who experimented on the blind and who created a discourse of pathology around blindness. They believed that blindness corrupted the personalities of the blind and made them prone to melancholy, indolence, and shyness. Education was supposed to cure these problems. Educators' looked for demonstrations of gratitude by internees as indications of mental wellness and good social adjustment. These authority figures reasoned that blind individuals not affected by

²⁶ Ablard, *Madness in Buenos Aires*, 159-160.

²⁷ Belmartino, *La atención médica Argentina*, 21-59.

the psychological problems of blindness would realize their good fortune and express their gratitude accordingly. Blind internees who did not express gratitude for their education or schooling were categorized as troubled, rebellious, or dejected.

Questions about pathology and blindness were deeply imbedded in notions about gender and performance that were reflected in many of the contradictions between normative and disabled gender articulated by scholars of history in the U.S. and Europe. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has argued, disability was not an additive to the other categories of identity analysis. Disability underpinned the ability for those categories to function. Normative gender roles were based not only on the cultural constructions of femininities or masculinities but also on the assumption of “normal” bodies capable of performing those roles.²⁸ Scholars in this field found that disability often changed the nature and tenor of discussions regarding the performance of gender roles. A blind mother of two shown to be deft at all the tasks of the ideal wife and mother of the 1950s was incredibly revolutionary because she asserted the capacity of a “pathological” body to perform “normal” gender roles.²⁹ In chapter five, I discuss a similar use of the blind mother by one organization for the blind and the way it too challenged the a-sexual construction of blind women. The ability of disability analysis to subvert common conceptions of beauty, motherhood, and work is a common thread to both literature on gender and disability and my own work.

²⁸ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” *Gendering Disability*, eds. Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchison (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004): 73-106.

²⁹ Catherine J. Kudlick, “The Outlook of The Problem and the Problem of the Outlook: Two Advocacy Journals Reinvent Blind People in Turn-of-the-Century America,” *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001): 187-213.

Sources and Archives

While conducting research in Argentina I benefitted from the recent reorganization of materials of the Sociedad de Beneficencia at the Archivo General de la Nación. Through that archive I gained access to a wealth of archival material regarding significant portions of this study. The restructuring of SBC records reflected a shift over the last several years in archival sciences in Argentina. A new generation of young Argentine university trained historians pursued careers in archival and library sciences in order to reform and reshape the archival process in the country. The energy and imagination of these professionals has driven the reorganization of archival collections at many of the most important archives and libraries in Buenos Aires. Their efforts, however, are relatively new and the archival collections that they seek to reorganize are as vast as the political obstacles. This means that at times collections that are being shifted to a more appropriate institution or those pulled for repair or reorganization are not always available to the researcher. Documents that might provide more insight into the daily experiences of blind residents in the institutes discussed here were not available. Routine documentation for the Instituto Nacional de Ciegos or individual case files for students at the school at the SBC were either being repaired or were subject to the movement of files between institutions at the time I was conducting my research.

Finding the daily documentation and mundane record keeping for private institutions for the blind created by the blind was not possible for different reasons. Disability and blindness have not been seen as subjects of historical inquiry in Argentina. Even the Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos has a very limited interest in the historical role it played in the development of blind institutions in Argentina and throughout Latin

America. They see little of their collections as historical, and the material they have preserved is kept informally in the corner of a cupboard in the director's office. I secured access to the first issues of the magazine *Hacia la Luz*, for example, at the New York Public Library rather than at the BAC itself. Without an institution to identify and procure documents from those early organizations most seem to have been lost. Few people had ever heard of the organizations that I was attempting to locate, and none could give me any guidance on where to begin to search. It is possible that as disability becomes a subject of greater historical inquiry, document cache's for these organizations will appear in unexpected places.

In place of the mundane materials produced by institutions on a daily or weekly basis, the documentation I was able to secure were materials produced for an audience outside of the institutions. This included annual ministry reports, newspaper articles, and institutional magazines. I refer to many of the writings and opinions expressed in this documentation as propaganda, because the intended audiences for these pieces were potential contributors and volunteers for the associations. It is also propaganda because blind leaders, in particular, wanted to change prevailing attitudes about the blind in society in order to create more job opportunities for educated and trained blind individuals. These articles of propaganda rely on similar terminology, themes, and styles designed to reflect back to the reading audience its own values. Use of the terms independence, utility, and culture often appeared in articles targeted to liberal positivist audiences. The language of justice, equality and rights appeared more frequently in socialist publications. Notably, blind leaders were willing to adopt a variety of tones in an effort to improve the acceptance of the blind in broad swaths of the reading public. The

only exception to this trend was the political organization *La Fraternal*. This group adopted overtly leftist ideologies and frequently challenged the language that suggested that the blind should accept some level of dependence that was used by other organizations.

The newspaper articles discussed in this analysis fall into two principle categories, those created by journalist to detail an important event and those created by blind institutions to promote themselves or their mission. Many, if not most, of the articles belonged to the second category. Blind institutions realized very early the power of newspapers to reach a broad audience and actively solicited the aid of such publications. Individuals in the institutions for the blind, therefore, wrote many articles that appear about the blind. Only during major public events or moments of crisis within major institutions, such as the 1917 strike at the INC, did journalists take an interest in the blind from an outsiders' perspective.

Blind leaders wrote many of the articles discussed here for a sighted audience. Francisco Gatti, director of the *Instituto para Ciegos de Ambos Sexos*, "*Francisco Gatti*" (The Francisco Gatti Institute for the Blind of Both Sexes, hereafter ICAS), established the importance of publishing while still the director of his own institution. He founded one of the first magazines for the blind, *El Ciego*, in 1909. All subsequent institutions for the blind went on to establish their own magazine publications, some with greater success than others. Most of these magazines were printed in ink as they were intended to serve as both propaganda and fundraisers. The BAC, established a Braille version of its publication *Hacia La Luz* alongside its ink version. The topics and material in the two

publications quickly diverged after several issues, but I was unable to gain access to the Braille version. Thus, most of the material I examined were documents printed in ink.

Organization

Chapter three is the fulcrum that divides two different eras in organizing for blind social services in Argentina. Chapters one and two represent the earliest phase in the institutionalization of blind services, which was largely controlled by sighted liberal reformers. This period is marked by a tension between what these reformers wanted to create and the resources available to them. Their conceptualization of what those services should and should not be was modeled on similar institutions in the United States and Europe. Chapter three outlines the events that led to the rise of a politically active community of blind leaders who began to challenge the control of sighted advocates for the blind in the creation of services for the blind. Chapters four and five, detail the ways that the new community of blind leaders first consolidated their authority over the institutionalization process and then came into conflict over the purposes of that process.

Before the rise of institutions in Argentina the blind had to rely on an array of strategies to fulfill their needs in time of economic crisis. Chapter one sketches the lives of the blind prior to the introduction of institutions for the blind and discusses the earliest attempt to form a specialized educational institution for the blind. I argue that blindness created socio-economic instability and that poor blind relied on aid from informal and formal networks of family, friends, street labor, and institutions to survive. The blind's use of the street and of institutions not designed for their needs generated frustration from liberal professionals and institutional administrators who saw this use of space as

antithetical to the logical and modern use of urban and institutional spaces. Epidemic disease energized authorities to create a specialized institution for the blind when they threatened to aggravate to create large cohorts of blind individuals in need of institutions not designed to meet their needs.

Attempts to found the first institution did not proceed as sighted reformers planned. Sighted experts from the U.S. and Europe refused to travel to Argentina to manage the project. This forced reformers to rely on the expertise of the blind European immigrants who were willing to travel to the country. Chapter two examines the ramifications of this reality as sighted reformers attempt to convince political authorities to build a national institute for the blind. Sighted reformers accepted the expertise of blind institutions if they were private, but refused to use blind experts as administrators in the national institute. Instead they chose to place a sighted woman with less experience in the position of director. Thus this chapter also demonstrates the relationship between gender and blindness during this period.

Though sighted reformers continued to dominate the institutionalization of the blind into the twentieth century, by the teens they began to face significant challenges to their authority. In 1917, frustrated students at the national institute went on strike. The strike was a crucial turning point in the history of blind institutions. Students allied with members of the blind community in Buenos Aires to stage the first political action on the part of the newly formed blind organization La Fraternal. The strike was the first signal that the organized blind community in the city intended to add their voice to discussions about institutions and services for the blind. Sighted reformers investigating the strike criticized the politics and position of the new blind organization, but were unable to deter

blind leaders from continuing to advocate on behalf of the blind. The investigation also heavily critiqued the sighted advocates and by the end of this period most of the most active sighted liberal reformers ceased to work in the area of specialized services for the blind. This created an opportunity for blind leaders to begin to articulate and realize their own goals and projects.

The rise of blind leaders and the dramatic expansion of blind services in both type and number are detailed in chapters four and five. In chapter four I examine the success of the first private organization for the blind built by blind leaders, the Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos. I argue that blind leaders used new understandings of heredity that argued that intelligence was a key factor in understanding degenerative disability versus accidental disability. The BAC capitalized on these ideas by creating an artistic and literary community of sighted and blind individuals who produced art and literature as equals. This community reinforced ideas about blind intelligence at the same time that a new generation of ophthalmologists studying ocular work accidents created new contingents of adults with poor or weak sight who needed the intervention of blind services.

As blind leaders gained more authority in discussions about social services for the blind competing visions of those services emerged between them. Division between these leaders resulted in the creation of multiple new organizations for the blind. These organizations varied significantly in terms of political orientation, priorities, and interpretation of blind needs. Regardless, all blind leaders had to expand services for the blind in the wake of a decade of public conflict and scandal surrounding the national institute. They did this by focusing on social services for the adult blind as opposed to

children. By focusing on the adult blind, organizations were able to attract divergent segments of the population whose concerns about blindness were derived from more than just a concern about Argentina's liberal modernization project.

Conclusion

On the surface this is primarily an institutional narrative that traces the development of social services for the blind in Argentina between 1880 and 1939. However, encompassed in that narrative is a struggle between blind leaders who knew that they were capable of determining their community's own future and sighted liberal reformers who believed that even after the intervention of scientific education the blind would always need the sighted to guide them. These two groups often worked side by side to establish these institutions. The conflicts and interplay between them weren't always apparent even to themselves. The evolving struggle over what constituted blind independence and dignified living was subject to distinct interpretations between these groups rooted in basic understandings of what blind roles blind men and women could and could not fill. Ultimately for the period under study, it was blind leaders -- not sighted advocates -- who dictated and debated the goals and limitations of institutions for the blind. It is this reality that separated their experience of institutionalization for the blind in Argentina from that in U.S. and European counterparts, which sighted Argentine reformers originally sought to emulate in the nineteenth century.

Chapter Two

"Por Amor de Dios:" Blindness and Institutions in the Nineteenth Century

Introduction

The institutionalization of the blind was a low priority throughout nineteenth century Argentina. During the first half of the century the often-violent process of national consolidation consumed the political elite. Liberal Unitarians desired a centralized system of education, medical care, and public health services modeled on those in Northern Europe. Their Federalist counterparts were content to allow the private sector, predominantly those that connected to the Catholic Church, develop charitable services without significant government intervention. During the seventeen years that the Federalists, under the leadership of Juan Manuel Rosas, were in power relatively few new social services were created. With the removal of Juan Manuel Rosas from power, liberals influenced by Darwinian and positivist views on the organization of society gained control of Buenos Aires. Argentine liberals were heavily committed to the principles of science as tools for creating order and progress. Strengthened by a political system that allowed them to circulate political power between them, the Argentine liberal oligarchy sought to recreate the modern urban spaces of Europe in Argentina by promoting immigration and public education.¹

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the blind represented a relatively benign population whose presence as beggars on the steps of churches served as a way for Catholics to perform good works. Porteños were content to allow these indigent citizens

¹ Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo, "Splendor and Fin de Siècle," *The Argentina Reader: History Culture and Politics*, eds. Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo, Latin American Readers Series (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 157-160.

to utilize street performances and sold small items to sustain themselves. However, as European cities like Paris became the image for recreating Buenos Aires, the blind together with other mendicants were increasingly critiqued as a bothersome and anti-modern presence on the streets. Since the era of Spanish control, legislating mendicancy had been difficult and anti-begging laws had been sporadic and ineffective. Mid-century attempts to control mendicancy reflected positivist ideals about population control and education. In conjunction with new legislation banning begging, politicians created the Asilo de Mendigos to mirror the poorhouses of Europe.² The asylum was intended to remove unsightly beggars from the streets and force them to work in the institution as a means to both repay the state for their maintenance and train them to be good workers on their departure.

The Asilo de Mendigos was one of many new more specialized institutions developing at mid-century in Buenos Aires. It joined new hospitals, asylums for the mentally ill, orphanages, and public schools all built to organize society into their properly defined spaces. From the outset of this process of institutionalization two key conflicts rose. First, control over institutional space was contested. Following independence President Rivadavia had authorized in 1823 the Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital to take control of the education of girls in Buenos Aires, the *Casa de Expósitos* (The Foundling's Home), and the *Convalecencia* (Convalescence Home). He also gave them the authority to construct any institution for the aid of women and children in the city that they deemed necessary. The move was part of a larger project by independence era liberal elites to secularize charitable institutions and education in the

² Valeria Silvia Pita, *La casa de las locas: Una historia social del Hospital de Mujeres Dementes, Buenos Aires, 1852-1890*, Colección Historia Argentina (Rosario, Argentina: Prohistoria Ediciones, 2012), 82.

city following the departure of the Spaniards. The SBC was comprised of women drawn from the highest circles of Argentine financial and political families. They represented the highest levels of female authority in the country and wielded that authority to secure resources and power for their institution. As a result, when the Rosas came to power in 1835, he suspended SBC operations for the duration of his tenure. The SBC was re-officialized following the removal of Rosas in 1852, but immediately confronted a new set of challenges from the liberal oligarchy that replaced him. Liberals, especially those closely associated with Domingo Sarmiento, viewed the SBC as the antithesis to the rational model of institutionalization that they desired.

Positivist ideals stated that rational institutions were scientific spaces controlled by an educated male professional class for humanitarian purposes. They were intended to alleviate the suffering of the population, and to prevent its future suffering through control and reeducation. To liberal males, female control of institutions represented religious charity that ameliorated the suffering of the poor for its own sake and did not resolve the underlying social problems that generated poverty, such as lack of education. Sarmiento successfully employed the SBC's use of religious education to challenge the SBC's control over the education of girls in Buenos Aires in the 1870s. When the society lost control over the schools they had to reinvent the purpose of their organization. They did this by rapidly expanding their provision of specialized social services to specific populations of poor women and children. Between 1870 and 1884, the SBC opened two new orphanages for children, new facilities for women with mental health issues, a hospital and clinic for the treatment of eye disease, and began to discuss opening an institute for the blind. They did this with the support of political allies from their own

families and the Catholic Church, who retained more authority in SBC institutions than in the wholly secular spaces proposed by liberal professionals. The rapid shift of the Sociedad into the sphere of public health and social control helped to solidify their position, and the position of subsequent similar organizations, in the sphere of social services. The rapidity with which the SBC could raise funds and construct a new institution appealed to political elites struggling to resolve social questions in the face of increasing immigration to the cities. Liberal male professionals, however, continued to level critiques of anti-modernism against female controlled institutions. By the late nineteenth century a sort of compromise was struck. As long as female controlled institutions appeared to operate out of the private sector and remained explicitly for women and children, male professionals began to quiet their critiques of those institutions.³ By the 1880s, women's position as administrators of supposedly private social institutions was largely accepted in Buenos Aires.

The second major issue that affected the process of institutionalization in Argentina was the persistent presence of diverse populations within institutions ostensibly constructed for specific populations. The construction of specialized institutions for specific populations in Argentina began by focusing on populations that either represented a threat to the stability or health of the general populace or who those populations seen as at risk and particularly important to economic development. Liberal professionals tended to define the sick, mentally ill and children as the groups most in need of state interventions. Therefore hospitals, orphanages, public schools and mental

³ Ibid., 13-25. As Valeria Pita highlights in her excellent history of the SBC in the nineteenth century, the idea that the SBC was a private charitable institution was a social construct. In reality it functioned as an essential arm of the state. It received the largest percentage of state funding on social issues and was subject to constant attempts at state intervention into its operations.

asylums were the first institutions to receive considerable attention. Children, especially those from the lower classes, represented the next generation of labor and as such it was important to liberals to secure their characters. The mentally ill and those with infectious diseases were dangerous due to their perceived potential to transmit their conditions and disorder the community that surrounded them. Controlling and containing these populations was urgent if Argentina was to compete on the international stage. Positivist theories in the fields of medicine and education asserted that resolving the problems of specific populations required specific institutions designed for those populations run by specially trained experts. Institutions constructed by the Sociedad and by the municipal and federal governments reflected that increasing specialization.

Increased specialization at existing institutions was not necessarily reflected in daily operations at those institutes. Asylums for the mentally ill, hospitals, orphanages, and poor houses all continued to provide a wealth of services they were not designed to provide to contingents of individuals not included in institutional regulations. The police, the judiciary, and the poor themselves, continued to use institutions in ways that defied attempts to rigidly define and control those spaces. For some, like the indigent blind population, in the absence of institutions designed to meet their specific needs, it was crucial that spaces within existing institutions remain fluid.⁴ Blindness, as well as other disabilities, created a fragile daily existence. The poor blind often had to weave together informal support from family, friends and street labor and institutional assistance to sustain them throughout their lives. For individuals who had access to informal support, mental health asylums and poor houses functioned as safety nets that allowed them to

⁴ For case examples see, Ablard, *Madness in Buenos Aires*; and Silvia Marina Arrom, *Containing the Poor: The Mexico City Poor House, 1774-1871* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

survive during periods of crises when informal resources were not accessible. Those without established informal sources, such as orphans or many immigrants, often shifted through an array of institutions over the course of their life. A blind orphan might begin in one of the Sociedad's orphanages, move to the poor house in their twenties, leave and spend time trying to earn money by selling wares or begging, live with friends for a time, re-enter the poorhouse, move to a hospital during an illness, and so on. Prior to the construction and expansion of specialized services for the blind, poor blind individuals utilized a web of family, friends, social institutions, and street laborers to provide them basic necessities.

Professionals who worked within social institutions were disconcerted by the various ways that the poor used those institutions to weather crises. Medical facilities grappled with the fact that in most cases blindness was not curable. The underlying issue that generated the presence of the blind in asylums and hospitals did not have medical resolutions. Institutions with more socio-economic purposes like orphanages and schools served populations within defined periods of their life span, in both these cases childhood. As blind children reached adulthood, these kinds of institutions struggled to find solutions for them outside the confines of these childhood spaces. Institutional administrators and professionals saw blind individuals as disrupting to the routines and purposes in the institutions they relied on. These problems were instrumental in creating support for specialized institutions for the blind among institutional professionals and administrators. It is not surprising, therefore that the Sociedad de Beneficencia began to consider the possibility of managing an institution for the blind when they were approached by import-exporter Thomas Drysdale in 1882 with funding for such a project.

By then, the Society already had a long history of attempting to manage blind adults in institutions not designed for those purposes. The Casa Expósitos housed a group of elderly blind women that were occasionally joined by younger blind girls. At the Asilo de Huérfanos, *inspectoras de turno* wrote many letters to the Asilo de Mendigos asking that they admit young blind men too old for continued care at the orphanage, and epidemics in both institutions seemed to threaten to increase the population of blind in their care.⁵

Blindness and Disability Before Specialized Institutions

The difference between subsistence and absolute impoverishment was minute for the disable poor. The situation of adults was especially tenuous because they were expected on some level to help provide for themselves by acquiring money or other resources. Poor disabled adults had to navigate through myriad of options to obtain the resources necessary for subsistence. Few of those options offered permanent solutions to the problem of meeting material needs.⁶ The only viable option for self-subsistence for most poor blind adults was to turn to a variety of street labors, including begging. One traveler through Buenos Aires in 1820 noted, "The blind and the lame, who are always objects of charity, post themselves at the doors of the churches, where the incessant cry of "For the love of God," in the most whining tone imaginable, assails every passenger."⁷

⁵ *Inspectoras de turno* were members of the SBC who acted as directors over specific institutions for defined periods of time. The positions rotated on a regular basis, though some socias demonstrated a preference for some institutions over others.

⁶ José Luis Moreno, *Un asilo para los pobres: Los mendigos y sus historias de vida, Buenos Aires a mediados del siglo XIX* (Rosario, Argentina: Prohistoria Ediciones, 2012); Edit Rosalía Gallo, ed. *Historia de la beneficencia en el Buenos Aires colonial* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2002); and María Elena Flores, *Expósitos Y abandonados: La práctica social de colocación de niños, La Casa Cuna De Córdoba, 1884-1950*, Colección Temática (Córdoba, Argentina: Editorial Científica Universitaria de Córdoba, 2004).

⁷ Emeric Essex Vidal, *Picturesque Illustrations of Buenos Ayres and Monte Video Consisting of Twenty Four Views Accompanied with Descriptions of the Scenery and of the Costumes, Manners, etc. of the*

Like street vending and street musicians the practice of begging for *limosnas* (charitable offerings) had its own methods and art that the individuals who practiced it had to learn and master. Done well, the practitioner might earn enough to eat and perhaps pay for a small room. In other cases the indigent blind or disabled might combine begging with other street tasks or performances to earn money. Usually these strategies only ameliorated a desperate situation. The poor blind had few options to better their situation and as they aged their ability to earn money only decreased and periods of crisis grew longer.⁸

Securing a livelihood was complicated by the reality that liberal social reformers often counted other forms of street labor together with begging when they discussed the problem of mendicancy in the city. Tasks that a blind individual considered work, the police and other social observers from the professional classes considered begging for charity because a blind individual performed them. At the end of the fin de siècle a reporter for *La Vanguardia* (The Vanguard) described a street scene in Buenos Aires in which an elderly blind man stood on a street corner selling newspapers. A middle-aged coronel walked down the street with a friend and spotted the man. He then turned to his friend and began a diatribe against charity and mendicancy. As the two men walked off the blind man yelled after them, "I don't beg!... I work!...I work!...Working I lost my sight

Inhabitants of those Cities and their Environs (London: R. Ackermann, 1820), <https://books.google.com/books?id=imB7AAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Emeric+Essex+Vidal&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjZzPK8yfrKAhVQ0mMKHRkIBgoQ6AEINzAC#v=onepage&q=Emeric%20Essex%20Vidal&f=false> (accessed 10/7/2015), 51. ...*por amor de Dios*.

⁸ Moreno, *Un asilo para los pobres*, 47-68.

and still I continue working."⁹ Though the story is likely apocryphal and from a later period, it highlighted the ways in which work performed by the disabled could be re-categorized by the able-bodied.¹⁰ For the blind, their mere presence in the street was categorized as mendicancy even when they performed a service. Therefore, family members were often accused of exploitation whenever their blind relative was in public performing regardless of the nature of their work.

Few blind individuals from poor backgrounds could fully sustain themselves through the street labors. Most of the poor blind relied to some extent on either family or friends to help them either on a daily basis or during minor crises. Arrangements between blind individuals and their families or friends varied widely and fluctuated as circumstances changed. People who provided assistance for many years suddenly found themselves unable to carry on. When nineteen-year-old Ricardo Vasquez's mother found herself unable to continue to aid her son, she walked him to the door of the Asilo de Mendigos and requested that they accept him as an inmate.¹¹ The families of the indigent blind were often poor and unable to accommodate the needs of their blind family members, but even in dire circumstances some individuals remained with family. When family members chose to retain their blind relative in the home it created a fragile economic situation, especially for women whose earning potential was already limited. Countless women with blind relatives in their care applied to the Sociedad de

⁹ P. Ciraudó, "Cuadros de la metrópoli: El ciego," *La Vanguardia*, May 1, 1908, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/12/2012), 10. ...*No mendigo!...Trabajo!...Trabajo...Trabajando he perdido mi vista y sin embargo, sigo trabajando!...*

¹⁰ See, chapter five for a discussion about the ways that organizations for the blind in the 1930s attempted to have typical blind street labors such as selling cigarettes or newspapers legitimized to prevent the harassment of blind vendors by the police.

¹¹ Moreno, *Un asilo para los pobres*, 104.

Beneficencia in the hope of earning a small stipend to relieve their otherwise desperate situation. Throughout the history of the SBC's annual *premios de la virtud* (Awards for Virtue), award recipients were frequently chosen because they cared for disabled family members. For example, in 1877 Lorita Mirauda, nearly blind, was awarded the Premio a la amor fraternal because she cared for and sustained three sisters, one blind, one paralyzed, and one chronically ill on the earnings from sewing she did for the *Comisaría de Guerra* (The War Commission).¹²

The precarious situation for lower class families with blind family members led many advocates to question the devotion of parents to blind children. Child abandonment was a persistent concern among the elite of Buenos Aires with contemporary experts placing the number of abandoned street children as high as ten thousand.¹³ The visible presence of street children led elites to assume that the difficult nature of caring for a blind child led nearly all families to abandon them. *La Prensa* (The Press) routinely used anecdotal evidence to demonstrate that blind children were especially susceptible to parental neglect. One article recounted the history of Ernestina Noyán who was abandoned on San Fernando beach by her parents. A passing boatman discovered Noyán, rescued her from the rising tide, and raised her as his own until his death in 1907. The boatman made Ernestina his heir and on his death she inherited a small house and a little money, set in trust for her.¹⁴ Tales of abandonment reinforced the tragedy that the public

¹² "Informe a la Presidenta de la Sociedad de Beneficencia," June, 8 1877, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Colección de la Administración Central, Premios de la virtud, 1823-1908, legajo 432.

¹³ Guy, *Women Build the Welfare State*, 20.

¹⁴ "Instituto de Ciegos de Flores: La importancia del establecimiento, próxima construcción de su edificio," *La Prensa*, September, 2, 1908, World News Paper Archive Database (accessed 11/20/2012). How this young girl arrived at the ICAS is unclear, but it seems likely that the boatman who raised her or someone close to him made arrangements for Ernestina to attend following his death.

associated with blindness. Thus, in the story of Ernestina the journalist emphasized her desertion and isolation.

The journalist writing about Ernestina failed to recognize the way that the tale also demonstrated that family was sometimes reformed or remade. Poor blind individuals also built networks of friendship or as in Ernestina's case family without links through blood that helped them acquire the necessary resources to survive. When Antonio Malaver became blind at the age of forty he moved in with a godfather, who aided him until he could no longer afford to.¹⁵ Juana Burgos lived with her friend Josefa Almeida for nine years until Josefa walked her to the Asilo de Mendigos to apply for entrance.¹⁶ As in the cases of Antonio Malaver and Juana, blind individuals sometimes found individuals to serve as support systems in place of family. They also built networks of friends that they could rely on. Institutions served as a temporary stopgap when those networks momentarily broke down. Thirty-eight year old Manuel Gonsales told administrators at AM that he relied on friends for two years to help him after he lost his sight.¹⁷ Despite extensive evidence that the blind formed substantial social networks to weather difficult circumstances, the fact that those networks often broke down helped sustain the idea that the blind lived beyond social integration and community.

In cases where the blind maintained clear links to their families, porteño social advocates assumed that lower class family members used the visible misfortunes of the disabled for family profit. Well into the twentieth century reporters, educators, and philanthropists described parents guiding their disabled family member to street corners

¹⁵ Moreno, *Un asilo para los pobres*, 110.

¹⁶ Ibid., 114.

¹⁷ Ibid., 111.

in the early hours of the morning and leaving them there to beg for food and money until the evening. Newspaper accounts and later advocates for the blind, labeled this behavior exploitation. For families the street labor of their disabled relatives served as a mechanism to ensure that the disabled family member remained at home and contributed to the family's economic health. When street labor was no longer an option, family members were more likely to utilize institutional services like that of the Asilo de Mendigos to care for their disabled relatives.

The blind who turned to institutions in times of crisis or as an alternative to street labor often found that this meant a process of constant movement through a variety of intuitions. Places like the *Hospital de Hombres* (Men's Hospital) or the *Hospital de Mujeres* (Women's Hospital) provided aid during temporary health crises or when illness compounded the difficulties of already permanent conditions, but they did not want to provide permanent shelter. Such was the case in 1844 when Fausto Arroyo became crippled at the age of thirty-six while working as a servant in a family home. The family for whom he worked sent him to the Hospital de Hombres to recover. Fausto did not leave the hospital again until 1858, when he was sent to the Asilo de Mendigos. Impoverished, Fausto was subject to the whims of institutional administrators, but more affluent members of society had more options and could pay to secure a bed for their blind relative at a hospital, asylum, or hospice.¹⁸

¹⁸ Letter to Señora Presidenta D. Inés Dorrego de Unzué from Inspectoras del Turno de la Casa de Expósitos, undated, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Casa Expósitos, 1852-1919, legajo 1, 3-4; and Pedro Roberts, *Reglamento para el Hospital y Consultorio Oftalmológico de la Sociedad de Beneficencia* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta La Nación, 1884); and Moreno, 99. In the records of the SBC's institutions there are consistent references to the problem of pensioners. Pensioners were paying residents at hospitals, asylums, and other institutions. They typically had some physical issue that required daily attention, but were not patients. In SBC institutions pensioners were often "respectable" women fallen on hard times. Several former SBC associates were granted space at SBC institutions after they became

The practice of using medical facilities to house and care for those with permanent physical conditions was an increasing source of tension over the nineteenth century. Doctors in particular wanted to control space in hospitals and asylums through a system of categorization and division. Diseases and illnesses were to be given their own pavilions or wings and only patients requiring the specialized medical expertise for that pavilion should be admitted. Individuals with uncomplicated permanent physical conditions who required daily attention but not expertise did not require doctors. As a result, doctors did not want these individuals to consume the space of the patient. In actual practice social institutions continued to house a myriad of individuals whose reason for admittance did not conform to the stated purpose of the institutions where they were located. A good example of this is the contingent of *granulosas* housed at the Casa Expósitos run by the Sociedad.¹⁹ This was a group of older blind women that lived at the Foundlings Home and were cared for by interned orphans. Occasionally, caring for and living with these women served as punishment for girls who misbehaved at the *Casa de Huérfanas* (Home for Orphaned Girls) or Asilo de Huérfanos.²⁰ From time to time, the *socias* (SBC members) attempted to locate another facility to house these women, but they consistently failed. Younger blind girls whose presence posed logistical difficulties at the Casa de Huérfanas occasionally joined the older women.²¹

destitute following the death of their spouses. Doctors at SBC institutions were often frustrated by the presence of pensioners who they believed stole space from genuine patients.

¹⁹ Granulosas means granulars and references several types of eye infections often associated the appearance of grit or grains around the eye. These types of infections were associated with blindness in the late nineteenth century.

²⁰ Letter to the Presidenta de la Sociedad de la Beneficencia from Saturnina Rononis, date unknown, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo "General Martín Rodríguez," 1899-1929, legajo 71.

²¹ Ibid.; and Larran de Vere, *Vicenta Castro Cambón*, 6-7.

The Asilo de Mendigos became a central point of contact for both blind individuals and for institutions seeking to remove the indigent blind from their own care. After a renewed effort to ban the practice of begging in 1858, municipal police gained greater authority to harass or remove *mendigos* (beggars) from Buenos Aires streets. This pushed more blind adults into hospitals and asylums where administrators did not want them.²² As a result the newly formed Asilo de Mendigos became a key point of institutional contact for the blind who found themselves unable to secure money from street labors. The Beggar's Asylum opened as a mechanism to control the number of *pobres vergonzantes* and *pobres de solemnidad* lining the streets and doorways of Buenos Aires.²³ Mendicancy and vagrancy had been a concern for city officials since the colonial era, but a long history of legislating the problem yielded few results.²⁴ The problem deepened as the number of immigrants to the country grew over the course of the nineteenth century. According to its own charter, "All of the *pobres de solemnidad* of both sexes will be admitted to the Asilo de Mendigos without distinction of nationality."²⁵ During its first year of operation sixty two percent of the one hundred and fifty-nine, individuals admitted during that year were born outside of Argentina. Many of these immigrants had lived in the country at least a decade and fought in several of the conflicts of the first half of the century. Whether newly arrived or long-term residents,

²² Archivo de la Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, Gobierno, 1868, 1873, 1878, 1885, 1886. The Asilo de Mendigos received many letters from other institutions seeking placement for blind individuals they no longer wanted in their care.

²³ Moreno, *Un asilo para los pobres*, 19. *Pobres vergonzantes* begged in the street and *pobres de solemnidad* begged at churches and nunneries.

²⁴ Gallo, *Historia de la beneficencia*, 9-12.

²⁵ Felipe Botet, Juan Cruz Ocampo, and Isac Fernandez Blanco, *Reglamento para el Asilo de Mendigos de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta de el Orden, 1858), 6. *Seran [sic] admitidos al Asilo de mendigos todos los pobres de solemnidad de ambos sexos sin distincion [sic] de nacionalidad.*

immigrants often noted that their only living family resided in their country of origin, effectively cutting them off from the most stable source of support. As a result, when they became ill they were forced to rely on municipal and provincial institutions.²⁶ Their reliance on these institutions swelled the population at places like Hospital de Hombres. This created a complex of problems because the permanently disabled, but not immediately ill resident required different modes of care than the rest of the population at these types of institutions. Hospitals, orphanages, and asylums relied on uniform routines and disciplines to control the large populations that they housed. Persons with disabilities often posed a problem in that they required individualized routines suited to their specific situation. As a result, after Mendigos opened, institutions around the city attempt to shift individuals from this undesirable population into the care of the new institution.

During the first year of operation at the Asilo de Mendigos, blind individuals comprised the largest group with a shared disability at the asylum at twenty-one percent of the resident population. More than half the blind population was born outside of Argentina.²⁷ Of the fifteen Argentine nationals fourteen were born in Buenos Aires. A slightly higher percentage of the blind population was male and those men were on average younger than the general population. Of the forty-one residents under the age of fifty, twenty-nine percent were blind. The relative youth of the blind population was reflected in their movement out of the asylum. For many of these individuals Asilo de Mendigos served as a temporary stop to bridge times of particularly intense hardship. Lino Romero, a twenty-nine year old baker who lost his sight just a year prior, entered

²⁶ Moreno, *Un asilo para los pobres*, 47-68.

²⁷ Only fifty four percent of the blind were born outside of Argentina compared to sixty-four percent in the general population when adjusted for the blind population.

the asylum in 1858. By the end of the year he requested and was granted departure, returned for a brief period and then left without permission a short time later.²⁸ This mobility in and out of the asylum reflects the experiences of more than half the blind residing at the institute during its first year of operation. Most of these individuals left of their own accord, some with and some without permission. A few shifted from the asylum to hospitals or hospices. Leaving the asylum was not necessarily easy. Nine of those who left the asylum did so without the permission of administrators and were considered fugitives. Blind individuals who arrived by way of the police had a particularly difficult time leaving. On January 20, 1885, for example, the police came on the forty-year-old blind Italian Catalina Llancomino and her sixty-year-old mother appearing to beg. The day after they were placed in the Asilo the brother/son of the two women, Jose Lauria spent the day writing letters to influential members of society in an attempt to secure the release of his relatives.²⁹ He assured officials that he would care for them and that they did not need the services of the Asilo.

As was the case of residents at most asylums of the period, blind residents at Mendigos were expected to work. Specifically, residents were expected to sew. Sewing and knitting were tactile occupations that residents could learn from each other. Blind men often needed to learn the skill, but blind women simply adjusted their existing knowledge of the practice. The clothing produced at Mendigos was destined for other institutions in Buenos Aires such as the *Asilo de Invalides* (The Invalid's Asylum).³⁰ That

²⁸ Ibid., 96.

²⁹ Letter from Jose Lauria via Esteror M. Perezto to Intendente D. Carcuato de Alvear, January, 21 1885, Archivo de la Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, Gobierno, 1885, legajo 43, carpeta 683.

³⁰ Letter from Hona María to Intendente D. Carcuato de Alvear, undated, Archivo de la Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, Gobierno, 1885, legajo 43, carpeta 1028.

the asylum used the large blind population in residence to produce clothing for sale contradicted the assertion by proponents of education for the blind that the blind needed formalized and specialized training to develop marketable skills. Prior to specialized institutionalization popular imagery of the blind was confined to the archetypes of the blind beggar and the blind invalid. The beggar was mobile but pitiful, and relied on the charity of strangers. The blind invalid was stationary and tragic, and relied on the care of family or friends often to the detriment of their caregivers. Even when an individual was able to continue to work in his or her previous trade, loss of sight often meant decreased wages. Petrona Gómez Fonseca earned a living taking in sewing, but as her sight began to fail the work dried up, despite the fact that she was still able to perform her work.³¹ Working in an asylum like Mendigos did not improve that image because asylum work was not seen as work. It was therapy, leisure, or character building. Institutional authorities and reformers alike did not consider the work skills of the blind transferable outside of that institutional setting.

Prior to the creation of blind institutions in Buenos Aires, the impoverished blind wove together fragile strands of social interaction to create a barrier between themselves and destitution. Without education or vocational training many of those blinded early in life found that the mechanisms they relied on changed often. This created more instability but also revealed a level of mobility often ignored by contemporary social advocates. Unlike their middle and upper class counterparts, lower class blind people were more likely to enter the public record through their contact with the police, hospitals, and a variety of other institutions designed to control, contain, and help the lower classes. Over

³¹ "Informe de la Comisión encargada de adjudicar el Premio a las virtudes," May 7, 1872, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Colección de la Administración Central, Premios de la virtud, 1823-1908, legajo 432.

the nineteenth century those institutions grew increasingly specialized as doctors and other experts attempted to create stronger access to political and social authority.³²

Ophthalmology and Blindness

Discussions about specialized institutions for the blind in Argentina began in 1865 with an epidemic outbreak of eye infection at the Casa de Expósitos in Buenos Aires. Epidemic disease was a persistent concern of nineteenth century Latin American nations. Latin American elites were aware that by the fin-de-siècle Europeans equated frequent epidemics with backwardness and under-development. National leaders in Latin America believed it was crucial to gain control of disease in order to attract foreign capital and achieve modernity.³³ Epidemics also often had a catastrophic effect on the available work force. Death and permanent disability as a result of waves of disease threatened the potential productivity of the most important national resource, labor. However, epidemics that threatened to create large cohorts of blind were a particular problem from the perspective of nation builders. The blind were a population that might come to rely wholly on state support. Epidemic diseases that caused blindness not only

³² Julia Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Antonio Alberto Guerrino, *La medicina en la conquista del desierto* (Buenos Aires: Circulo Militar, 1984); Ablard, *Madness in Buenos Aires*; Belamartino, *La atención médica Argentina*; and Pita, *La casa de las locas*.

³³ Diego Armus, *Disease in the History of Modern Latin America: From Malaria to AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Gilberto Hochman, María Silvia Di Liscia, and Steven Palmer, eds., *Patologías de la patria: enfermedades, enfermos y nación en América Latina* (Lugar Editorial, 2012); Sidney Chalhoub, "The Politics of Disease Control: Yellow Fever and Race in Nineteenth Century Rio de Janeiro," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 25, no. 3 (1993); and Julyan G. Peard, *Race, Place, and Medicine: The Idea of the Tropics in Nineteenth-Century Brazilian Medicine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

depleted the work force but also created a new dependent population that drained state resources.³⁴ An outbreak of eye disease at the largest institution for orphaned children, Casa Expósitos, generated a significant amount of fear for institutional authorities. There was little that they or the medical establishment could do in 1865 to stop or treat the disease. At that time, none of the graduates of the Medical School at the *Universidad de Buenos Aires* (University of Buenos Aires, hereafter UBA) had the option to specialize in ophthalmology. Few doctors had any quantity of experience with eye disease to help them understand the epidemic. Without specific knowledge, the doctors who attended the Casa Expósitos outbreak discussed the issues by way of general hygiene and cleanliness. In terminology that became very familiar over the course of the nineteenth century, they honed in on the unscientific and unclean practices of the nuns who cared for the children at Casa Expósitos on a daily basis. They blamed a poor hygienic atmosphere at the home for creating conditions that allowed the disease to spread.

The 1865 outbreak was just the first in a series of epidemics that affected Sociedad institutions for children throughout the late 1860s and 1870s. The institution most affected was the Asilo de Huérfanos. The Asilo was created in response to familiar accusations that hygienic conditions and practices at SBC institutions led to one of the most historically significant yellow fever outbreaks in the history of the city. The 1871 yellow fever epidemic devastated the population of the city and forever altered its

³⁴ Argentine medical authorities, like most, believed that any illness that caused high-sustained fevers had the potential to cause blindness. The two diseases most consistently referenced as causing blindness in the nineteenth century, however, were smallpox and conjunctivitis purulent. In the 1920s and 1930s, ophthalmologists argued that cases of nineteenth century conjunctivitis were almost always misdiagnosed cases of trachoma.

landscape.³⁵ The Society responded to attacks by opening an asylum for boys and girls orphaned by the disease. They framed the opening of the asylum as a charitable duty, but it also served as a key move to offset the negative publicity generated during the epidemic. The orphanage quickly grew beyond its original purpose and became one of the largest institutions for destitute children in the country.

The creation of the Asilo caused a secondary wave of problems for the sociedad. As soon as the Asilo opened its doors in April of 1871, conditions within the asylum led to a renewed flare up of epidemic eye disease. Similar to the 1865 outbreak at Casa Expósitos, the disease swept through the girl's ward causing red, swollen, and encrusted eyes. The socias were alarmed by the number of children blinded in their care and as in 1865 unsure of how to proceed. They decided to contact Dr. Cleto Aguirre at the UBA Medical School for assistance. Aguirre trained as a general practitioner, but over the course of his career acquired an interest in conditions of the eye that led him to go abroad for training.³⁶ When he returned, he convinced others that Argentina needed an ophthalmology program at the UBA. The outbreak of an eye infection at the Asilo de Huérfanos provided Aguirre with the first opportunity to test his students. Following the request for assistance by the SBC, Aguirre sent Pedro Roberts, a medical student, to the Asilo to study the outbreak.³⁷ According to Robert's reports, the disease entered the Asilo with the very first orphans. Lack of public knowledge about conditions of the eye and

³⁵ For a detailed account of the 1871 epidemic see, Miguel Angel Scenna, *Cuando Murió Buenos Aires, 1871* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Bastilla, 1974).

³⁶ Raúl Argañez, *Apuntes para la historia de la oftalmología en la Republica Argentina* (Buenos Aires: "Las Ciencias" Librería y Casa Editora de A. Guidi Bufarini, 1916); and Jorge Argentino Landaburu, "Primeros hospitales y servicios oftalmológicas de la Republica Argentina," (thesis, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1954), 4.

³⁷ After training with Aguirre, Roberts went on to become a prestigious author of hundreds of publications on eye conditions focused on strabismus, or conditions in which the eyes cross or turn.

problems maintaining a hygienic atmosphere in the face of a rapidly growing population meant that the infection spread quickly. A quarter of the female population suffered from the condition within one month of opening.³⁸ The girls suffered enormous swelling of the eyelids, abundant secretions from all of the conjunctiva mucus, photosensitivity, and intense fevers. Just as Roberts began to believe the initial outbreak was controlled a new one began in August. By the end of October seventy-two girls were affected.³⁹ Ultimately, Roberts controlled the outbreak through a process of quarantine, cleaning routines and silver nitrate eye washes. He also advised the *socias* that the girls in their care were not strong enough to fight off infections such as *oftalmia purulenta* (purulent ophthalmia) and he advised that each girl be given a pint of beer a day to help their dispositions.⁴⁰ Finally he chemically cauterized the conjunctiva of the eyes of those with the most severe infections.⁴¹ Despite Aguirre and Robert's dire warnings none of the girls suffered permanent damage to their eyes.⁴²

The epidemic generated a ripple affect through the Society and through the medical cohort in Buenos Aires. By 1875, the medical school at the University of Buenos Aires agreed to add ophthalmology as a specialized field of training, the first

³⁸ Pedro F. Roberts, *Memoria sobre la epidémica de oftalmología en el Asilo de Huérfanos* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1872), 13. In this initial outbreak the girls suffered more than just pink eye. They had rashes on their necks, herpes outbreaks on their lips, inflammation and ulceration on the inside of their cheeks.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14. In conjunction with the matron in charge, Roberts had the infected girls moved to the women's hospital also under the SBC's control.

⁴⁰ *Oftalmia purulenta* was an eye infection that began in the conjunctives before spreading to the rest of the eye and eventually forming a purulent sack or bag around the eye. Letter to Presidenta de la Sociedad de Beneficencia from Pedro F. Roberts, September, 7 1872, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1855-1901, legajo 92.

⁴¹ This process did not effect the anatomical portions of the eye involved in sight.

⁴² Roberts, *Memoria sobre la epidémica*, 103-105.

specialty authorized at the school. The new program was well timed because the 1872 epidemic was only the first in a series of epidemics at the Asilo de Huérfanos and Casa Expósitos. In 1876, Sociedad president Dolores Lavalle de Lavalle and her friend Emma von Praet de Napp described the situation for Ministro del Gobierno de la Provincia Dr. D. Aristobello del Valle as a, "...an ill, that for some time now you could almost consider endemic."⁴³ The problems with eye disease at the orphanage led to an important collaboration between the influential socias at the Sociedad and the burgeoning ophthalmological profession in Buenos Aires. Shortly after the efforts of Aguirre and Roberts at the Asilo de Huérfanos, the Sociedad converted the old Casa de Expósitos into the *Hospital Oftalmológica "Santa Lucia"* (Santa Lucia Ophthalmological Hospital). In order to do so Presidenta Petrona Villegas de Cordeso abandoned the idea of creating a *Sala de Maternidad* (Maternity Clinic) in the building.⁴⁴ The hospital was one of the few institutions controlled by the SBC to serve both male and female adults. It provided free medical care to those suffering conditions related to the eye and employed nearly all of the newly minted ophthalmologists from the UBA in its first year of operation. Pedro Roberts was the first acting director at the new institution when it opened in 1878.⁴⁵

As the doors to new ophthalmological institutes opened the socias simultaneously began to show more awareness of the social conditions of the blind in the city. Two

⁴³ Letter from Dolores Lavalle de Lavalle and Emma V. de Napp to D. Aristobello del Valle, March 22, 1876, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Colección de la Administración Central, Memorias-Estadísticas-Exposiciones, 1824-1913, legajo 574. ...*mal que, de algunos años a la fecha casi puede considerarse endémico.*

⁴⁴ "Informe," AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Colección de la Administración Central, Memorias-Estadísticas-Exposiciones 1824-1913, legajo 574, 60.

⁴⁵ Argañez, *Apuntes para la historia*, 12. Cleto Aguirre was named as co-director but it seems his position was honorary.

socias in particular began to demonstrate an increased interest in issues regarding the living conditions of the blind. Emma van Praet de Napp and Dolores Lavalle de Lavalle were the two most powerful women in the Sociedad throughout the 1870s. During the decade they alternated the position of Presidenta and Vice-Presidenta between them. Throughout their tenure they were both deeply involved with the Hospital Oftalmológica and with the orphan asylums run by the society. They worked intimately with Pedro F. Roberts to fund the new hospital and were in close contact with Dr. Cleto Aguirre throughout the waves of epidemic disease that swept through their orphanages. Their intense focus on conditions of the eye may explain why under their tenure, women who were blind or who cared for blind relatives were frequent beneficiaries of the coveted premios a la virtud.⁴⁶ When they began to focus their attention on new projects beyond upper administration in the 1880s these two women were primed to consider institutionalizing services for the blind.

As discussed in the introduction, the history of institutionalization draws heavily from the work of Foucault regarding the rise of modern medicine in the western world.⁴⁷ The classic example cited by Foucault and Foucauldian scholars was the mental

⁴⁶ AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Colección de la Administración Central, Premios a la Virtud 1823-1908, legajo 432. The awards were small stipends given to women the socias deemed to be the most virtuous of the deserving poor. A rigid vetting process determined the awardees. Members of the society visited applicants to inspect their living conditions and virtue in order to determine the most deserving candidates.

⁴⁷ For a selection of institutionalization histories see, Robert Hill Couch and Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind, *Out of Silence and Darkness: The History of the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind, 1858-1983* (Troy, Alab.: Troy State University Press, 1983); Kimberly French and Perkins School for the Blind, *Perkins School for the Blind* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2004); Klages, *Woeful Afflictions*; Joel F. Harrington, *The Unwanted Child: The Fate of Foundlings, Orphans, and Juvenile Criminals in Early Modern Germany* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); Gwendoline M. Ayers, *England's First State Hospitals and the Metropolitan Asylums Board, 1867-1930*, New Series, v. 19 (London: Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1971).

institution. The process of institutionalization was a key component of the professionalization and specialization of doctors practicing psychiatry. Early alienists relied on the institutions to generate fixed sets of patients they could observe, categorize, and treat. In doing so they gained legitimacy as professional specialists and their advice/knowledge became a form of social capital with which they could barter. Likewise the institutions came to rely on these mental health experts to legitimize their existence in a landscape of professional institutions generated to resolve social ills. This legitimacy lent institutions the ability to request or demand resources and power from political authorities to perpetuate their existence. In short, professionals and institutions maintained a symbiotic relationship, each legitimized and strengthened by the existence of the other.⁴⁸ Like psychiatry and the mental institution, ophthalmology and institutions for the blind were definitively linked, but the relationship was significantly different.

Blindness represented the limits of ophthalmology. In the nineteenth century, blindness was the consequence when ophthalmological practice failed to effect a cure for a disease or condition.⁴⁹ For nineteenth century doctors, blindness was a symbol of the need for ongoing research in the field and a warning to the public of the dangers of ignoring the professional expertise. At it simplest, blindness served as the ophthalmologists' "or else" when they admonished the public to adhere to their

⁴⁸ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*; Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1988); Ablard, *Madness in Buenos Aires*; Mariano Ben Plotkin, ed., *Argentina on the Couch: Psychiatry, State, and Society, 1880 to the Present*, Diálogos Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003).

⁴⁹ Some specific forms of blindness were the subject of ophthalmologic attentions. Cataract removal became routine over the course of the 19th century.

recommended practices, such as not sharing towels or beds.⁵⁰ More than warning, however, blindness also marked the limits of ophthalmological knowledge and became the driving force behind the professionalization of the specialty. Ophthalmologists were aware of this and as one Argentine ophthalmologist pointed out in his 1916 history of the field, "The Medical School, recognizing the importance of the specialty from the point of view of preventing blindness, created the department in 1875, making it the specialty dictated in our school of medicine."⁵¹ During the nineteenth century, the primary goal of the profession was the prevention of blindness and therefore institutions for the blind were not places where doctors found patients. Rather, institutions served as reminders to the broader public of the necessity of medicine and the acquisition of medical knowledge. As a result doctors were intensely involved on a philanthropic rather than medical level. If they participated in institutional administration it was to use the institutions to instigate public health campaigns to prevent diseases that caused blindness. For these men, institutions functioned as propaganda machines rather than research centers.

The differences between blindness and cognitive/intellectual disability are important, because they offer a counter example to the Enlightenment model of medicalization. According to this model medical practitioners are primarily responsible for the pathologized body. I argue that this was only true in so far as medical practitioners maintained belief in the curability of the affliction. Once the doctors reached the conclusion that loss of sight was permanent then an individual became blind and in doing

⁵⁰ Mary Wilson Carpenter, "A Cultural History of Ophthalmology in Nineteenth-Century Britain," Representation and Nineteenth-Century History, ed. Dino Franco Felluga, "Extension of Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net," http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=mary-wilson-carpenter-a-cultural-history-of-ophthalmology-in-nineteenth-century-britain (accessed 2/16/2016).

⁵¹ Argañez, *Apuntes para la historia*, 257. *La Facultad de Medicina, reconociendo la importancia de la especialidad bajo el punto de vista de la prevención de la ceguera, creó la cátedra de oftalmología en el año 1875, siendo la primera especialidad dictada en nuestra escuela médica.*

so passed out of the medical sphere and into the socio-political.⁵² Fields focused on the study of the human condition rather than those studying the human physical organism were more instrumental in the pathologization of the blind.⁵³ Ophthalmologists were most heavily involved in blindness prevention rather than dealing with the condition after the fact. In Argentina, the earliest practitioners determined that the greatest threat lay in infectious disease, particularly when it took the form of the epidemic. Every outbreak of epidemic eye disease generated significant fear that whole new contingents of blind individuals would emerge. That they did not signaled success for ophthalmology. The fear that one day an epidemic might generate a significant population of blind drove the process of specialized institutionalization, faith in the progress of science tempered that fear.

Institutional Models in Europe and the United States

By the time a handful of elite Argentines decided to open a private school for the blind in 1884 formal education for the blind was one hundred years old. The first such school open under the direction of Valentine Huay in Paris in 1784. Huay's school provided the basic model for blind curriculum on the European continent. Huay developed a philosophy of education that focused on building the intellectual and aesthetic skills of the blind. As such the Huay model focused heavily on literacy through Braille and the development of musical vocations. He believed that training in these areas would elevate the blind in the esteem of the general populace thereby providing security and social support. Shortly after Huay founded his school, institutions for the blind in

⁵² See discussion in Introduction for a detailed discussion.

⁵³ I discuss this in depth in the introduction and chapters three and four.

other countries began to appear. Most of the continental European institutions closely mirrored Huay's model and built schools for blind children that emphasized intellectual training and musical vocations. The countries of continental Europe largely chose to support education for the blind through government subsidy, royal support and charitable donation.⁵⁴

The only European country that did not adopt the Huay model was England. As a result a very different approach to the blind developed. The English institutions were predominantly asylums in which there was no age limitation. In the English model vocational and handicraft training predominated and intellectual training was only considered useful where it could supplement vocational training. English schools emphasized vocational crafts for two reasons. First, English administrators of institutions for the blind worried that without a vocation the blind would become indolent. Vocational training therefore directed moral development in a more positive direction. Secondly, in contrast to the Parisian school, the English schools relied wholly on charity to remain in operation. This reality reinforced the predominance of vocational training as many institutions relied on the products crafted by the blind to function.⁵⁵

The third model operating at the time that the Argentines began to consider opening a school was that of the *estados udinenses* (U.S. citizens). U.S. reformers such as Samuel Howe had studied the methods used in both Europe and England and came to the conclusion that a blend of the two traditions was best. As such the U.S. schools offered both intellectual and vocational training. All male students received preliminary musical training but only those who demonstrated an inclination or special talent in the field were

⁵⁴ Hayhoe, *God, Money, and Politics*; and G. A. Phillips, *The Blind in British Society*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

encouraged to pursue music as a vocational option. The U.S. blending of the English and Huay models gradually gained popularity over the course of the nineteenth century. It was this model that proved most appealing to the Argentines at the outset of institutionalization in the 1880s.⁵⁶

The Thomas Drysdale School for the Blind, 1884-1885

When Thomas Drysdale approached the society with an offer of ten thousand pesos to open a school for the blind in 1884 he wrote, "A youth full of intelligence, but deprived of sight and destitute of all instruction, inspires in me, as of two years, the idea to found a school for the blind in this city."⁵⁷ Drysdale was an elderly businessman with a substantial fortune and an influential family. Born in 1813 in Scotland, Drysdale arrived in Argentina as a very young man. Though he maintained an estate in Liverpool, England, Buenos Aires was the principal port of call for his business operations and he maintained a deep connection to the city. He was a regular member of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church where he donated enough money to create a stained glass window dedicated to him and his family. As he aged he developed a desire to leave a legacy in the country. An institution would imprint the name "Drysdale" on the map of the city in much the same manner as his window had at St. Andrew's. An institution for the blind would have been attractive because by the late 19th century education for the blind was well established in Europe and its advocates successfully convinced many that it was a

⁵⁶ For more information on European and U.S. models of education for the blind see, Hayhoe, *God, Money, and Politics*; and French, *The Education of the Blind*.

⁵⁷ Letter from Thomas Drysdale to Sra. Presidenta de la Sociedad de Beneficencia, February 11, 1884, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Colección de la Administración Central, Donaciones, 1823-1908, legajo 30, 311. *Un joven lleno de inteligencia, pero privado de la vista y destituido de toda instrucción, me sugirió, hace dos años la idea de iniciar la fundación de una escuela de ciegos en esta ciudad.*

revolutionary advance for persons otherwise bereft of hope. Drysdale also tapped into a tradition among Scottish and English immigrants to Argentina of establishing schools open to natives and foreigners.⁵⁸ A school for the blind, therefore, offered Drysdale an array of personal benefits: the longevity of his name; cultural relevance; and the social capital accrued to him and his progenitors through connection to an institute intended to better the social condition.

The initial plan for the *Escuela para Ciegos "Tomas Drysdale"* (The Thomas Drysdale School for the Blind) was expansive. Like U.S. schools it was to blend the French tradition of intellectual education with the British focus on vocational training. In describing his vision Drysdale sketched a stand-alone modern institute built to house hundreds of blind individuals from Buenos Aires and eventually the entire country. Though primarily an educational facility, Drysdale's initial plan included space for older men and women who, due to a lack of opportunity, had not received an education as children. He wanted to begin with a student body of fifty students schooled on a curriculum that included a basic primary education with a focus on reading and writing in Braille, history, geography, and mathematics. Just as in the Valentin Huay model, most students would receive extensive musical training, but would also learn a vocational handicraft like U.S. students. In this case he intended that boys would learn mattress making and basket/mat weaving and the girls sewing and crocheting.⁵⁹ To begin the project an administrator and a select group of other professionals would travel with him to Argentina to oversee construction. The staff was intended to include sighted primary

⁵⁸ Alina Silveira, "Educating a City's Children: British Immigrants and Primary Education in Buenos Aires, 1820-1880," *The Americas* 70, no. 1 (2013): 33–62.

⁵⁹ It was common practice in all of the SBC's institutions for women and girls to spend large percentages of their free time sewing and crocheting. Evidence suggests that blind girls participated in these activities along with their sighted peers.

education teachers with knowledge of Braille for boys and girls, a blind music teacher, and a small contingent of sighted instructors for the workshops. Thus Drysdale's initial plan was an amalgam between school and asylum, intellectual and vocational training, European and U.S. model.

Drysdale increased his pledged funding for the school to twenty thousand pesos shortly after approaching the SBC. In a letter to his solicitor, John Dunn, Drysdale asserted that one "...must not imagine, that the Institution in which I am taking such an interest in is intended to be a feeble one or that it would have been launched with our good promise of ample support and encouragement. In this respect I am not aware of an Institution of the kind which ever had a better beginning and prospect."⁶⁰ The chairs of the committee to establish an institute for the blind, Emma van Praet de Napp and Dolores Lavalle de Lavalle, secured a donation of land and an additional ten thousand pesos from the municipal government of Buenos Aires. With so much in place before the project had even begun Drysdale anticipated rapid progress. His contact, Mr. Anagnos at the Perkins Institute gave him reason to be optimistic. Anagnos intimated to him that someone from their institution was interested in directing a school of his own in Argentina. Additionally, from January to February of 1884, there was a considerable amount of elite society interest in the school. In the fashion of the era, elite women held several charity balls to benefit the new institution. Doctors and politicians alike contacted the SBC to offer their free assistance to the new organization.⁶¹ With land and financial backing secured within months of his initial proposal the project seemed on the verge of

⁶⁰ Letter from Thomas Drysdale to John Dunn, September 1, 1884, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1852-1919, legajo 92, 322.

almost immediate success. The only step remaining was to secure an acceptable administrator with experience working with the blind. As there were no acceptable individuals living in Argentina at the time, Drysdale sent his representative in New York to Boston to select a staff.

Despite initial optimism, Dunn and Drysdale's first hopes for the new institute were soon dashed when none of the employees from the Perkins Institute accepted the job. With the help of Dr. Campbell of the Perkins Institute the search for an acceptable candidate then adopted a wider scope. In April of 1884, Campbell contacted Dunn and proposed that he write to Henry Snyder at the Ohio Institution for the Education of the Blind.⁶² Snyder was a well-respected young teacher at the institute and Campbell intimated that he would be an ideal fit for Drysdale's project. Despite Campbell's enthusiasm, Mr. Snyder expressed apprehension about the project from the start of negotiations. Mr. Snyder and Drysdale's representative John Dunn expressed concern over several clauses in the contract for the school administrator during their negotiations.

Upon discussing the matter with John Dunn, Henry Snyder objected to Drysdale's intention to admit all blind individuals regardless of age. Snyder wanted to limit the attendees to children ages six to fifteen lest it, "convert from school to asylum."⁶³ From the outset, blind education in the United States was designed to alleviate that state's responsibility to the blind in adulthood. It was integral to the understanding of reformers such as Samuel G. Howe that their schools not convert into homes, asylums, or respites for their students after they received an education. This was despite Howe's and others

⁶² Letter from John Dunn and Dr. Anagno to Thomas Drysdale, April 3, 1884, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1852-1919, legajo 92, 291.

⁶³ Ibid.

early realization that education for the blind did not convert into ready and open access to job opportunities.⁶⁴ Once educated the blind were to compete in the free labor market the same as their sighted peers. Whether they succeeded or not was not the concern of school administrators.⁶⁵ Drysdale believed, however, that given the comparatively late start of education for the blind in Argentina that admitting older men and women was a necessity in order to aid those who missed the opportunity as children. Indigent blind mendigos were a persistent concern for those looking to eradicate public begging from city streets.⁶⁶ To many, blind adults represented those with the most needs. Helping children was long-term solution but it did not resolve the immediate problem of mendicancy in the city. Snyder for his part was adamant that he would not administer an asylum for adults. In the end, Drysdale acquiesced to Snyder's opinion and agreed that the school could be restricted to school age children. The conflict between Drysdale and Snyder on this issue was the first in what would become a persistent problem for institutions for the blind through the 1920s.

Although willing to acquiesce to Snyder's demands regarding the age of attendees at the new institute, the two men reached a much more difficult impasse when they discussed the proposed administrative structure for the school. The Thomas Drysdale School for the Blind would join the array of institutions controlled by the Sociedad de Beneficencia. This meant that the Sociedad, as in all their other institutions, retained final

⁶⁴ James W. Trent, *The Manliest Man: Samuel G. Howe and the Contours of Nineteenth-Century American Reform* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

⁶⁵ That is not to say that schools did not spent significant time discussing how to make their students more competitive or pursuing new fields in which the blind could be trained. However, the success of blind education was contingent upon the blind entering the free market rather than continued dependence on institutions.

⁶⁶ Moreno, *Un asilo para los pobres*, 19-20.

decisions in all hiring and firing and final approval over all construction and maintenance. Snyder interpreted Drysdale's decision as one that placed the project in the more feminized sphere of charity, thereby decreasing its credentials as a professional institute and placing the financial footing of the school on unsteady terrain. By U.S. calculations professional institutions were masculine spaces that provided a necessary and scientific solution to a persistent social problem. The intent of these institutions was the eventual eradication of the problem itself and as such all decisions about daily operations had to be governed by male experts who were better suited to control institutional outcomes. Governments were more willing to supply the required funding because professional institutions provided a necessary social service. By contrast, he saw charitable institutions as ambiguously gendered spaces controlled by either male philanthropists or female volunteers that provided aid to individuals. The benefits provided were not obligatory and the manner in which they were provided need not resolve the underlying problems that generated the need. As such charitable institutions did not require expertise. Because charitable organizations were not considered obligatory for the social good they rarely received formal support from the state. This made them subject to the financial whims of the elite in their localities. Charitable institutions were therefore far more fragile than their professional counterparts. The public image constructed by the SBC and the fact that the organization was run by women, suggested to Dunn and Snyder an organization that was part charity and part social club with the economic instability he believed it entailed. As a result they requested that Drysdale consider placing the new school in the control of the Department

of Education, where they believed the project would be more stable. Snyder intimated that he was otherwise reluctant to travel to Argentina fearing the project would collapse.

Snyder and Dunn's discomfort with the SBC's role in the new institution was more complex than simple financial concerns. Both Snyder and Dunn were disconcerted over the amount of power the *socias* reserved over the administrator. Female administrators might interfere with the scientific principles that Snyder intended to introduce to the school. Snyder expressed concern that these women would have the ability to block or alter his administrative decisions. He disliked the idea of spending time negotiating or explaining to a group of women the necessity of his plans or proposals. They attempted to reassure the North American that this was simply a formality, that women at the Sociedad would rely on his expertise to guide the institution. Snyder's experience in the U.S. led him to expect more clearly divided roles between men and women with the context of social services. The society's assurances did little to persuade him that his role as an expert would supersede theirs. In fact the society did have a far more complicated relationship to their professional subordinates than they indicated to Snyder. The men who served in a professional capacity as doctors, teachers, and lawyers for the society were often at odds with the *socias*. The women in charge at the Sociedad expected their subordinates to adhere to the internal chain of command and to act with deference toward the *socias* high-class status during negotiations over institutional policy and priorities. Men who were willing to do this were rewarded and their suggestions incorporated into institutional structures with relative ease. Dr. Pedro Roberts, for example cultivated an amicable working relationship with the most powerful *socias* of the 1870s and 1880s. He was placed in charge of the Hospital Oftalmológica and nearly all of his suggestions for

the institution were met by the Society during his tenure. Other professionals generated more conflictive relationships to the *socias*. When there were significant problems the conflict could find its way into the public press where the society was vulnerable to accusations that their methods were backward and caused more problems than they solved.⁶⁷

Thomas Drysdale's experience in Buenos Aires with the Sociedad led him to differentiate between charity and profession very differently. Though rhetorically defined as a charity Drysdale knew that the Sociedad commanded immense political power and resources, more than their counterparts such as the *Departamento de Asistencia Publica* (The Department of Public Assistance) in the government. Since 1823, Argentines accepted that professionalization could occur under the auspices of female leadership so long as male professionals advised and guided those leaders. Unlike Dunn and Snyder, Drysdale separated institutional administration from professional expertise. The one could be female, so long as the other was male. He expressed his opinion to Dunn stating, "There is one point which I desire that you clearly understand, that is that whoever is the person that goes that they will be subject to the control of the Sociedad de Beneficencia and that if the person you name in your letter doesn't find this convenient there will be no other alternative than to break negotiation and look for another person."⁶⁸

As a result of his concerns and Drysdale's response to them, Mr. Snyder expressed considerable anxiety about the potential for success at the proposed school. He was very worried about undertaking the journey to South America without a guarantee of success.

⁶⁷ For a detailed discussion of politics with the Sociedad de Beneficencia in the nineteenth century see, Pita, *La casa de las locas*.

⁶⁸ Letter from Thomas Drysdale to John Dunn, May 8, 1884, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1855-1901, legajo 92, 294.

His fears that the school might fail led him to insist that construction on the new institution not begin until they tried the experiment for a few years, and that the first class be limited to twenty or thirty students, rather than fifty.⁶⁹ Snyder's fear that the school might fail directly reflected his discomfort with the placement of control of Drysdale's school in the hands of the SBC. In each letter exchanged as part of the negotiations with Drysdale and the associates of the SBC, Snyder probed the boundaries of the SBC's authorities and questioned the extent of funding available to the school.

After a long negotiation process Drysdale agreed to Snyder's requests to delay construction and limit the size of the first class. He offered him more money for travel and a salary for his wife to assume the position of matron of the home and sewing teacher. They agreed that prior to arrival Snyder would employ a blind music teacher to travel with him, but that the workshop instructors could be secured in Buenos Aires. After months of negotiations and growing frustration on the part of Thomas Drysdale, John Dunn wrote to inform all those involved that he was sure to secure Snyder's signature on a contract at their next meeting.⁷⁰ That meeting never took place and Henry Snyder backed quietly out of all negotiations.⁷¹ Embarrassed by Snyder's actions, Mr. Anagnos of the Perkins Institute assured John Dunn that he would locate someone else.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Letter from John Dunn to Thomas Drysdale, September 24, 1884, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1852-1919, legajo 92, 328.

⁷¹ Ohio, "Executive Documents" (1886), Google E-Books Database (accessed 3/22/2014). In January of 1885 the superintendent of the Ohio Institution for the Education of the Blind left his position to join the ministry. Shortly thereafter Henry Snyder was offered the position of superintendent and remained in the post until July 1885 at which time he left to take a professorship at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. It is likely that when he approached his superintendent about potentially taking the Argentine position he was informed of the events that were transpiring and decided that the Argentine position was no longer worth the risk.

By February of 1885 no candidates were forthcoming and Thomas Drysdale turned his attention to Europe. He contacted his countrymen at the National College for the Blind in London to seek assistance. In London he received the same response as he had in the United States. Few professors with comfortable positions at existing institutions would willingly travel to Argentina to head a school not yet in existence. Drysdale's London contact, Professor Manuel Blasco, informed him that only one individual responded positively to the idea, but this person was a former student at the school and did not have the necessary skills to undertake the task. Blasco suggested that he contact Argentine President Julio Argentino Roca and ask that a formal diplomatic request be sent to Spain for a professor for the blind to fill the position. Drysdale took the advice and President Roca quickly complied with a letter to the Spanish ambassador.

The Spanish ambassador was eager to assist the project and several names were raised but again none of the sighted instructors were willing to travel. The one candidate willing to come was again a former student of the institute for the blind in Madrid, and again Drysdale was advised against hiring him. As 1885 came to a close Drysdale's health began to deteriorate and it became clear that he would not return to Argentina to see the school completed. Additionally, support for the project at the governmental level evaporated and with it the promised plot of land. In consequence more compromises had to be made to Drysdale's original plan. It was increasingly clear that obtaining the services of a sighted instructor of the blind was going to be extremely difficult. None of the potential candidates were keen to travel to the country and risk their health for the project.⁷² The only possibility that remained viable was to hire someone who was blind.

⁷² Letter from Manuel Blasco to Alexander Doughty, February 28, 1885, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Instituto de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1852-1919, legajo 92, 354.

Several individuals had already presented themselves to be considered. Each of these applicants was dismissed as a result of the references given to them by the sighted administrators who had trained them. In each case, the administrator cited a lack of experience and the necessary character to undertake a project of this nature. Drysdale was advised that at least one of these candidates "did not present the qualifications necessary for so difficult and delicate a post."⁷³ Drysdale and his associates at the SBC faced a difficult conundrum. They were told and believed that a blind individual was incapable of administering a project of this scale, but the only willing candidates were former students of institutions for the blind. The only solution to the problem was to significantly change the scale of the institution and eliminate the need for an administrator. Instead of the Thomas Drysdale School for the Blind for fifty to one hundred students, the project converted to a small classroom for blind residents at the Sociedad's Asilo de Huérfanos. The classroom would be run by a blind teacher hired with the aid of the Spanish ambassador, but under the control of the Asilo's rector Bernabé Podernera as well as the inspectoras in charge of the Asylum. Thus, several layers of hierarchical administration restricted the new blind teacher's authority.

Once the new direction for the institute was agreed upon the Society, who by 1885 had taken over the project from the Drysdale family, was able to secure a teacher relatively quickly. With the aid of the Spanish ambassador they hired Spaniard Juan Lorenzo y Gonzalez a teacher and accomplished musician. Hiring Lorenzo y Gonzalez further altered the original plan for the school by reshaping its proposed curriculum. As a result of Lorenzo y Gonzalez's background in music the first systematic attempt to

⁷³ Ibid.

educate the blind in Argentina closely resembled Valentin Huay's model rather than that of the North Americans. The focus of the classroom was intellectual training and musical preparation in musical theory, piano, organ, and violin. Beyond music the male students received no other form of vocational training. As girls were not considered acceptable candidates for musical training and could be taught to sew and knit in the company of their sighted companions, changes to the school curriculum significantly altered the gender make up of the project. During its first several decades of operation the classroom was comprised predominantly of boys and young men.

Conclusions

After the official inauguration of the classroom, the project continued to suffer setbacks. When Drysdale departed the project he appears to have taken the funds committed to the school with him. The classroom at the Asilo languished without space of its own. The continued presence of the blind in the general population caused considerable anxiety for the inspectoras in charge. They asserted for the public that the pavilion was necessary to protect the blind from the general population but the reality was more complicated. Most of the students attending the class at the Asilo were young men in the late teens and early twenties. The Inspectoras worried that the young men were a disruptive influence for the younger charges. They wanted the new pavilion constructed in order to separate these older males from the younger children. They were not able to accomplish this until 1890 when donor Héctor Munoz, helped the SBC build a new pavilion devoted to the blind at the Asilo.

To complicate the situation at the Asilo further, just five years after immigrating to the country to head the first classroom Juan Lorenzo y Gonzalez clashed with the inspectoras del turno at the Asilo de Huérfanos Monica T. de Huergo, Luisa C. de Gelly and Luara de Figuera. In December of 1891, Lorenzo y Gonzalez approached the directive committee of the Sociedad for a raise. In going directly to the committee he circumvented the authority of the inspectoras charged with administration of the Asilo. After his error was brought to the attention of the directive committee the raise was rescinded and Lorenzo y Gonzalez was formally admonished. Three months later, Lorenzo y Gonzalez again circumvented the internal authority structure at the Asilo and requested that the directive committee grant a salary to his son for his assistance in the classroom.⁷⁴ This second offense was too much and the Society dismissed the professor. His last contact with the organization was a letter sent to the directive committee requesting some form of documentation that certified that he had worked for the school between 1886 and 1892 in an attempt to secure other employment.⁷⁵ Within months of his departure Bernabé Podernera was in contact with another young blind man recently emigrated from Italy to Montevideo to open a school for the blind. This young man, Francisco Gatti, would play an integral role in the development of education for the blind in Argentina, but not before he spent considerable time building social capital as the teacher for the blind at the Asilo.

In the end, the first concerted attempt to begin the formal education of the blind in Argentina did little to affect the lives of the majority of the blind living in the capital city

⁷⁴ Letter from Inspectoras del Asilo de Huerfanos Monica T. de Huergo, Luisa C. de Gelly and Luara de Figuero to the Presidenta de la Sociedad de Beneficencia, May 1892, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1871-1919, legajo 92, 152.

⁷⁵ Letter from ex-professor de ciegos to Sra. President de la Sociedad, August 3, 1892, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1871-1919, legajo 92, 163.

or in the country as a whole. Most individuals continued to rely on a web of family, friends, and public or private institutions to subsidize their lives in the face of few job opportunities. Even those trained by the society had difficulty maintaining financial independence. The greatest effect that the classroom had was to make members of the middle and upper classes aware of blind education as an option for social reform. It suggested to people like Emilio G. Coni, Cecelia Grierson, and Ulises J. Codino the possibility of founding a new national institute for the blind to rival those in Europe. Unfortunately, interest did not alter the apathy toward the blind on the part of politicians. From 1890 to 1908, reformers in education and the social services proposed a range of different projects to found a national institute for the blind. Each one failed to garner support from Congressional delegates or from the ministers controlling the Department of Public Instruction.

Chapter Three

"The Man Should Mandate:" Blindness, Authority and the National Institute for the Blind

Introduction

The classroom at the Asilo de Huérfanos opened at the outset of the fin de siècle, the period often referred to as Argentina's golden age. In 1880, Argentina overcame the problems facing national consolidation and began what they hoped would be a rapid progression toward modernization.¹ By the end of the period, marked by the centennial celebrations of 1910, doubts began to develop among the country's nation builders about Argentina's ability to achieve parity with European nations and retain its distinctive Argentineness. At the beginning of the period national authorities hoped that immigration to the country from Europe would speed modernization. By 1910, they began to reconsider immigrants place in the process of nation building as they began to attribute more of the problems facing cities to the immigrant populations with their accompanying influx of international ideologies and priorities.

Rapid immigration and urbanization placed considerable strain on the existing social infrastructure. The inability of that social infrastructure to meet the needs of large swaths of the lower classes generated class strife. National authorities attributed the rise of lower class politics to working class immigration from Southern Europe. By the twentieth century, Italian immigration was categorized as the most dangerous. Roberto Bunge a staunch opponent of Italian immigration claimed that Italian immigrants were

¹ Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo, *The Argentina Reader*, 157.

"full of defects."² Their Latin temperaments made them prone to emotional displays and outbursts that drove increasingly conflictive class politics. By the turn of the century, those class politics were beginning to organize around and be divided by leftist ideologies. In the 1890s, both anarchist and socialist organizations emerged claiming to speak for the working classes. They began to challenge the ruling liberal oligarchies paternalistic stance toward social services and to demand that social infrastructure reflect their distinct ideological definitions of justice.

In addition to political conflicts, massive migration to the cities began to affect urban culture and social structures. New languages, food, and leisure activities began to be seen increasingly as threatening to engulf and replace Argentine culture. As Jose Moya points out, by the 1890s more and more Argentines preferred Spanish immigration because it was believed they would assimilate better into Argentine culture without radically changing it. Argentine medical professionals began to articulate Spanish racial superiority compared to other immigrant groups in an effort to influence immigration law.³ Discussions about immigrant culture and politics were, however, still in their infancy at the time that the first school for the blind was under discussion. In 1880, no one questioned the international character of teachers for the blind. By the time liberal professionals and national authorities began to discuss expanding to a national institute for the blind the problems generated by immigration had created a tension between internationalism and nationalism among the liberal professionals and politicians seeking to resolve the social questions raised by immigration to the cities.

² Quoted in Jose Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1998), 348.

³ Ibid., 348-349.

The fields of medical, public health, and education were some of the most internationally oriented professions in Argentina. Professional prestige and specialization was acquired not only by being well read in international research, but by physically studying in Europe and the United States. Between 1884 and 1915, the liberal professionals who concerned themselves with blind issues did so from a comparative perspective. Their arguments in favor of social services for the blind were structured around the existence of such institutions in countries whose medical and educational systems they sought to model or with whom they were in competition. Most proposals for blind institutions drafted by sighted liberal professionals were, therefore, produced out of concern for Argentina's international image rather than as a resolution to a national problem. As long as Argentina's direct competitors in South America, Chile and Brazil, did not develop national institutes, Argentine politicians felt little urgency to do so in the face of the problems generated by immigration and urbanization. Consequentially, momentum toward a larger institution stalled after the classroom for the blind opened in the Asilo de Huérfanos. The handful of reformers that encouraged the development of a new institution confronted an absence of political will.

The inability of sighted advocates for a national institute for the blind to generate political interest in the project created a window of opportunity for at least one blind immigrant to create an institution of his own. In 1900, after several years working for the SBC, Italian Francisco Gatti opened the *Instituto Argentino para Ciegos de Ambos Sexos "Francisco Gatti"* (Francisco Gatti Institute for the Blind of Both Sexes, hereafter ICAS). Gatti hired his former students from the classroom at the Asilo de Huérfanos and friends to teach at his school. Gatti's practice of hiring former students and friends gave the

school a decidedly international character, as many of the teachers were also immigrants. He did not refuse entry to any student and thus his student body also represented an array of nationalities. Gatti developed both his curriculum and educational materials by importing them from Europe through his mentor in Italy. Any materials pertaining to Argentina had to be produced by Gatti himself, or by finding an artisan willing to create the material from scratch. For example Gatti had considerable difficulty acquiring a raised map of Argentina and South America in order to teach local geography. In other words, Gatti's institution was deeply international in its formation and operation at a time when nationalistic sentiments regarding education began to grow stronger in the face of massive immigration.

The ICAS represented the first step toward more comprehensive education for the blind, but it also generated significant questions about the place of gender and disability in education for the blind. When liberal reformers detailed their requirements for the director of the national institute for the blind their ideal candidate was a sighted white male Argentine with training in special education. Gatti was a white male with training in special education, but he was crucially not sighted nor Argentine. When national authorities desired to convert the ICAS into the national institute for the blind they were presented with two candidates for director of that institute, the blind Gatti or the female director of the women's section at the ICAS. As highlighted in chapter one, until this point men almost universally controlled national institutes with direct connection to government. The nationalization of the ICAS in 1908 forced national authorities to decide how to value the expertise of a disabled man versus a less experienced woman. They ultimately decided to place greater value in sighted female authority than in blind

masculine authority. This set the stage for cyclical confrontations over gender and disability in blind institutions for the next several decades. When momentum shifted in the later years of the 1910s toward supporting a new institution, arguments about the fitness of the blind to teach the blind resurged. Between 1908 and 1913 a series of legal projects to expand services for the blind emerged. The result was that sighted reformers displaced blind workers who had forged services for the blind during the previous two decades.

In choosing a sighted woman over Gatti, national authorities revealed the deeply rooted structures of disability that constrained and defined the limits of blind masculinity in this period. In many ways, global histories of disability and blindness mirror Gatti's story of rejection and oppression. These histories lead us to expect that Gatti's disability was an essential component of the prejudices that he faced. However, because Gatti wrote copious letters to his mentor in Italy during this period we have a unique opportunity to understand how Gatti interpreted the problems he confronted. His letters were complex and revealed multiple aspects of Gatti personality and life experiences. He saw his demotion in personal terms, from the perspective of his experiences as an immigrant, and as man working in a field with a strong tendency toward female leadership.

Years of Frustration

Momentum toward the construction of education for blind children slowed considerably once the classroom at the Sociedad de Beneficencia's Asilo de Huérfanos was in operation. The classroom generated interest from reformers and bureaucrats, but

simply could not garner enough enthusiasm to persuade politicians to back the projects that arose after 1884. Influential men and women such as Emilio Coni, Cecilia Grierson, Ulises J. Codino and Minister for Public Instruction Antonio Bermejo each articulated a plan for a school for the blind. None succeeded.

Emilio R. Coni was one of the first to propose the creation of a national institute for the blind in 1897.⁴ At the time Coni was a respected and powerful hygienist instrumental in the creation of the *Inspección Higiénica y Médica de las Escuelas de la Capital* (The Medical and Hygienic Inspection of Capital City Schools) (1881) and the *Patronato de la Infancia* (The Infancy Foundation) (1892). He also spearheaded education for the deaf and mobility impaired in the capital from 1890 to 1892. His interest in "questions pertaining to healthy, ill, and *desvalido*" infancy dated to a study he conducted of infant mortality in Buenos Aires in 1879.⁵ When he approached the SBC in 1897 he felt that the national institute for the blind was the next logical step in his campaign to protect and improve the children of Buenos Aires because, "Given the progresses of the country and the uppermost place that its capital occupies in South America, it is exceedingly strange that nothing or very little has been done in favor of the wretched blind, that are so favored in the civilized nations of Europe."⁶ He informed the SBC that with their support he was ready to draft a proposal for a new institute. Like his

⁴ For more on Emilio Coni see, Donna J. Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead: The Troubled Meeting of Sex, Gender, Public Health, and Progress in Latin America*, Engendering Latin America (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); or Pita, *La casa de las locas*.

⁵ Letter to the presidenta de la Sociedad de Beneficencia Doña Carolina L. de Pellegrini from Emilio R. Coni, June 21, 1897, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Colección de la Administración Central, Varios, 1852-1908, legajo 566, 35. ...*las cuestiones pertinentes á la infancia sana, enferma y desvalida*. The term "desvalida" typically meant wretched or unfortunate. It was sometimes applied as an umbrella term to refer to the disabled, but this was rare.

⁶ Ibid. *Dados los progresos de este país y el lugar culminante que ocupa su capital en la América del Sud, extraña sobremanera que nada ó muy poco se hace hecho en favor de los desgraciados ciegos, que tan favorecidos se encuentran en las naciones civilizadas de Europa*.

successors in the coming decade, at the core of Coni's concern about the blind was Argentina's international image and Buenos Aires' place as a model city in South America. His project was generated in part because of the concerns he expressed about disabled childhood, but in larger part was a project of modernization for the sake of modernization.

After approaching the SBC, Coni relinquished his proposed project to the *Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública* (Ministry of Justice and Public Instruction, hereafter MIJP) headed by Dr. Antonio Bermejo. Bermejo was invited to visit the classroom at the SBC in 1897 in order to gauge the effectiveness of education for the blind. Bermejo was so impressed by what he saw in the classroom for the blind that he vowed to begin work to establish a national institute. When Bermejo accepted the position of representative to the Pan-American Conference in Mexico in 1901 he turned the project over to his successor at the MIP, Dr. Magnasco. Magnasco's first step was to commission a study of blind education in Europe in order to gauge what would be required to establish a European style school for the blind in Argentina. He chose Argentina's first female doctor and children's health advocate Cecilia Grierson for the task.

When Magnasco approached Grierson about the possibility of researching blind education she was already living in Europe while she studied gynecology and obstetrics in Paris and fulfilled her role as vice-president of the International Congress of Women. Studying blind education reflected her interests in childhood disability in general.⁷ To conduct the study Grierson visited schools in Switzerland, Italy, France and England. She

⁷ Biblioteca Académica Nacional de Medicina Buenos Aires, "Cecilia Grierson," Académica Nacional de Medicina Buenos Aires, <http://www.biblioteca.anm.edu.ar/grierson.htm> (accessed 2/17/2016).

was most impressed by the Northern European schools and detailed their operations in her report. She concluded her survey of blind education in the region with a proposal to move Argentina in the direction of a national institute. She proposed to send a group of Argentine teachers to train at the Royal Blind Asylum and School in Edinburgh. According to Grierson, sending Argentines to train abroad was the only genuine option.

One of the indispensable conditions for the success of blind education is that teachers possess correct language and have an appropriate accent for the country, and even more necessary is this condition when founding an institution, because some of those same students will later become teachers at the institution and will have the qualities or defects with which they were inculcated and, therefore, the future success of the institutions will depend on these beginnings, with regard to the purity of the diction and appropriate accent for the language.⁸

Foreign educators would jeopardize the success of the blind in the Argentine labor market by teaching incorrect Spanish with an accent. Additionally, it was important that Argentine instructors train in an institute where they would learn the spirit of economic and industrious labor.⁹ Grierson feared that foreign educators trained using the system of education for the blind used in Paris would focus too much on intellectual training and not enough on physical formation and character building, the true bases of education.¹⁰ She also felt that it was important for Argentine educators to learn how to make an institution for the blind profitable without relying on government subsidies as the Paris school did. Despite Grierson's reputation and influence, no attempt was made to put her

⁸ Cecilia Grierson, "Institutos para ciegos: Informe de la Doctora Grierson," *El monitor de la educación común* 21, no. 328 (1900): 412, <http://www.bnm.me.gov.ar/catalogo/Record/000140205/Details#tabnav> (accessed 06/18/2013). *Una de las condiciones indispensables para el éxito en la enseñanza de ciegos, es que los maestros posean el idioma correctamente y tengan el acento propio del país, y más necesario aun, es esta condición al fundarse un instituto, puesto que algunos de los mismos alumnos ciegos serán más tarde los maestros del instituto y tendrán las cualidades ó defectos que les fueron inculcados y, por lo tanto, de esos principios dependerá el éxito futuro de la institución, en cuanto á la pureza de la dicción y el acento propio del idioma.*

⁹ Ibid., 416.

¹⁰ Ibid.

suggestions into action. The nationalistic stance asserted by Grierson's report, however, influenced later decisions about blind institutions.

Perhaps influenced by Grierson's report or at the behest of the MIP, in 1903 the department of the *Poder Ejecutivo* (President's Office, hereafter PE) commissioned Ulysses J. Codino to study and draft a proposal for a national institute. The report Codino submitted detailed existing systems of education for the blind and provided an intricate outline for a national institute in Argentina. Like Coni before him, he argued that Argentina needed to pursue a national institute because, "It is necessary then, a reparatory action to salvage the country from such a disagreeable spectacle and concede to the blind a situation more in harmony with our progress."¹¹ Motivated by concern over Argentina's international image, Codino also traveled to Europe to conduct research. He arrived first in Italy where he visited three institutions, and ended his tour in Paris at Valentin Huay's institution. He focused his examination of blind education on the contentious issue of blind professionals.

European institutes were divided on the subject of the blind teaching the blind. According to Codino, institutions in Southern Europe utilized a large number of blind professors, and actively encouraged students to seek positions at institutions for the blind. In contrast, Northern European countries prohibited the blind from teaching positions only allowing them to serve as "*sub-maestros*," or helpers. According to Codino, the reason for Northern European rejection of the blind teacher was the limitations of blind professors. He asserted that blind professors could not teach geometry, geography, the

¹¹ Ulises J. Codino, *Memoria sobre enseñanza de ciegos: proyecto de organización de un primer instituto nacional presentado al ministerio de instrucción pública* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Boullosa, 1903), 12. *Es necesaria pues, una acción reparadora que salve al país de tan desagradable espectáculo y que conceda á los ciegos una situación más en armonía con nuestros progresos.*

natural sciences, or any subject matter that required certainty of knowledge. According to Codino, each of these subjects required sight to genuinely know and understand the subject matter. The blind could therefore never be experts in these subjects. Sighted teachers on the other hand could teach all subject matter. Though lack of versatility concerned Codino he was more troubled by the idea that, "Neither can the blind deal with discipline, nor correct all of the bad habits that accompany blind infancy; this explains why all blind professors require an assistant or sighted auxiliary teacher."¹² According to the project outline, therefore, the position of director "should be practiced by a sighted professor, specially prepared, as happens in all analogous foreign establishments. Only in this way, can you ensure the smooth running of didactics, moral, and discipline at the institute."¹³

Grierson and Codino's reports on blind education, given just three years apart, reveal the difficulties that Argentine reformers faced. Both favored the Northern European style of educating the blind favored by England and Germany. Grierson, insisted that the teachers be Argentine, but not necessarily sighted. Codino insisted that they be sighted, but not necessarily Argentine. As no normal school in Argentina taught special education for the blind the only way to fill both requirements was to follow Grierson's suggestion to pay staff member to spend a minimum of one year training at an institute in Europe. The expense and logistics of such an undertaking were beyond the scope of what most politicians were prepared to support. Instead, blind education was

¹² Ibid., 56. *Tampoco el ciego puede ocuparse de la disciplina, ni corregir todos aquellos malos hábitos que acompañan la infancia ciega; esto explica el porqué todo profesor ciego necesita un ayudante ó maestro auxiliar vidente.*

¹³ Ibid., 64. *...debe ser ejercido por un profesor vidente, especialmente preparado, como sucede en todos los establecimientos análogos del extranjero. Solamente así, podrá asegurarse la buena marcha didáctica, moral y disciplinaria del instituto.*

allowed to develop organically in the private sector led by one of only a few educators in Argentina with experience teaching the blind, the blind Italian Francisco Gatti. Before he began to teach Gatti already represented the worst traits in an educator for the blind as detailed by Argentina's earliest reports on blind education. For Grierson, Gatti's status as a foreigner was unacceptable. Her references to the "appropriate accent for the country" insinuated that even a Spanish-speaking immigrant could not meet the requirements necessary to teach the blind in Argentina. Codino's reports clearly indicated that he believed Gatti's blindness would lead to the breakdown of discipline and morality at an institute for the blind. There was little that either reformer could do, however, to stop Gatti from developing his own institution with his own resources and ingenuity.

Francisco Gatti: The Italian

Born in Orta Nova, Italy Francisco Gatti lost his sight when he was eight after he contracted smallpox during an epidemic. His parents sent him to the Istituto "Principe di Napoli" per giovani non vedenti (Prince of Naples Institute for Blind Children), which was opened to teach the children left blind after the epidemic. He completed training in music and blind pedagogy, but on leaving the institute Gatti found few employment opportunities for him in Italy.¹⁴ An accomplished musician, he chose to tour Europe giving concerts rather than to continue his frustrating search for work in his home country. He began to entertain the idea of travel to the Americas in 1889 after encountering

¹⁴ Letter from Doménico Martuscelli to Señor Gobernador de Napoles, May 29, 1904, in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires. Gatti may have been awarded a degree for blind education from the institute only after he decided to become an educator for the blind in the Americas. He wrote to his former mentor requesting that the institute send him documentation certifying him as an educator in 1904.

members of the Uruguayan elite in France during a concert tour.¹⁵ The Uruguayans' enthusiasm for Gatti's ideas and the fact that the country lacked schools for the blind led Gatti to state, "Now I have proposed to found in this capital an institute for the blind."¹⁶ He saw himself following in the footsteps of his mentor and hero Domenico Martuscelli, founder of his alma mater in Naples. He believed he could use his position as a trained European expert in the Americas to create a respectable life and historical legacy.

To Francisco Gatti, the Americas represented a new start. In letters to his mentor he references financial troubles in Italy and the difficulty of sustaining himself through musical performances.¹⁷ He saw the Americas as many immigrants did, as a place where his special expertise could reshape the social landscape. On opening his own institute he demonstrated his concern about how best to utilize his expertise stating, "I am worried about the idea of choosing between the many teaching methods used in the principle centers of Europe. Which will be the most convenient and the best to adopt in this Institute."¹⁸ He exercised his knowledge in order to earn prestige and to carve his name in history as few of his peers could do in Italy. Gatti's goals for himself only became clear

¹⁵ Comisión Pro Homenaje al Profesor Francisco Gatti, *Francisco Gatti: Propulsor de la enseñanza de los ciegos de la Republica Argentina*, (Cordoba and Buenos Aires: 1928), in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires.

¹⁶ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Martuscelli, April 17, 1892, in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires. *Ahora me he hecho el propósito de fundar en esta Capital un Instituto [sic] para ciegos.*

¹⁷ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Martuscelli, 1889, ed. unknown, in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires.

¹⁸ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Martuscelli, June 27, 1902, in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires. *...se agita la idea de escoger entre tantos métodos de enseñanza usados en los principales centros de Europa.Cuál sería el más conveniente y el mejor para adoptarlo en este Instituto.*

as they began to slip away in the face of challenges to his expertise as a blind man teaching the blind.

Gatti's first stop in the Americas was Montevideo where his musical performances impressed an enthusiastic circle of elite Montevideans including Uruguayan President Julio Herrera y Obes (1890-1894). Gatti was quick to capitalize on his success and began to incorporate lectures on blind education into his performances in Montevideo. Musical concerts and public lectures generated enough support among the Uruguayan political elite that Gatti was encouraged by Uruguayan President Herrera y Obes to found a school in Montevideo. In 1892, Gatti was given authorization to pursue an institution for the blind with the express idea that if successful, it would be converted into a national institute.¹⁹ In preparation he located ten students, male and female, to enroll. With the support of the President he acquired a space and materials. With the project poised for success, Gatti faced a sudden and insurmountable problem. When the first day of classes arrived none of the students appeared. Parents balked at the last minute and the school failed. Few Uruguayan parents were willing to send their blind children to a boarding school for three quarters of the year regardless of the promised benefits.

Gatti interpreted the parents' reluctance to part with their children in several ways. His most benevolent assessment was that parental affection made them reluctant to part with their children because they were either ignorant or scared of the potential independence afforded by an education. His own experience of separation from family was one he remembered fondly and often referred to his teacher and guide at the Institute

¹⁹ Francisco Gatti, *Memoirs*, ed. by unknown, Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires.

for the Blind as his "true father."²⁰ He never saw his family's decision to send him to a boarding school as a sacrifice and consequently failed to understand Uruguayan or Argentine parental reluctance. Instead he viewed this attachment as misguided, ignorant, and out of place. He said of the children, "whose parents tenaciously resisted the fulfillment of my work, because of affectionate misunderstanding, because of their laziness, because of their shameful exploitation, I am having to convince some and offer others aid in the form of clothes or money to decide."²¹ Parents who withheld such an education from their children selfishly harmed them in order to preserve their own sentimental attachments. In other instances, Gatti adopted views similar to child welfare advocates in the nineteenth century. He lamented that some parents refused to send their children to the school for fear they would lose the income that the children earned begging in the street. He spoke with derision of the exploitation that blind children faced from their own family members who used their blindness for personal gain.

Gatti was disillusioned after the failure of his first attempt at institution building. In 1893, he headed south to Buenos Aires to begin again. In the Argentine capital city his reputation in Montevideo preceded him. He was once again welcomed into the homes of elite society. On arrival in Buenos Aires, Señora Carolina Lagos de Pellegrini, then president of the Sociedad de Beneficencia, asked him to perform at the prestigious Teatro

²⁰ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Martuscelli, December 8, 1912, in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires.

²¹ Francisco Gatti, Carta abierta a mis ex alumnos, September, 22 1919, Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires. *...cuyos padres se resistían tenazmente a la realización de mi obra, ya por mal entendido cariño, ya por su indolencia, ya por una vergonzosa explotación, [sic] teniendo que convencer a unos y ofrecer a otros socorros en ropa o dinero para decidir.*

Colon in 1893 thereby securing his access to the wealthiest circles in the city.²² The timing of his arrival in Buenos Aires was fortuitous. The Directive Committee of the SBC, under the direction of Pellegrini had recently fired Juan Gonzalez y Lorenzo from his position in the classroom for the blind in the Asilo de Huérfanos operated by the SBC. Pellegrini's high opinion of Gatti and the fact that he was perhaps the only other person in the city besides Gonzalez y Lorenzo qualified to teach the blind earned him Gonzalez y Lorenzo's former position. The orphanage position allowed him to put his public lectures into practice and advertise his expertise on blind education to the financial elite of porteño society. In the classroom at the Asilo he was able to work with a group of students on a permanent basis for steady pay. The school also allowed him to circumvent the issue of parental consent. However, his years there were clouded by his desire for greater authority and personal independence. He rarely discussed his years working for the SBC. Instead in letters home these years represented struggle, during which he sacrificed much in order to accrue the capital and student base to found an institution of his own. In an open letter to his students in 1919 he described these years, "It is public and notorious that in 1901 I founded in this capital the actual "Instituto Nacional de Ciegos," with my personal resources that represented ten year of incessant labor. But, few know the series of penalties and sacrifices that I endured to gather a group of students in my school."²³

²² Notas para la historia del Maestro Francisco Gatti: Apóstol de los ciegos, fundador del primer instituto que para la especial educación de ellos, se estableció en la República Argentina, Buenos Aires 1914, (unknown), in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires.

²³ Gatti, Carta abierta.

The highlight of Gatti's time at the SBC came in 1897, when the Minister of Public Instruction, Dr. Antonio Bermejo, visited the orphanage. After touring the classroom for the blind the minister promised to create a national institute. Though Bermejo's promise was one of the failed projects of the belle époque, it inspired Gatti to depart from the SBC and begin work on his own institute.²⁴ Between 1897 and 1900, he began an intense concert circuit in an effort to acquire enough funding to rent a suitable location.²⁵ As he began his own project he quickly discovered that he faced the same problem in Buenos Aires as he faced in Montevideo. Porteño parents were as reluctant to send their children to a boarding school as Montevidean parents. Despite considerable time and energy spent scouring hospitals, asylums, schools, and hospices searching for blind children, Gatti's school opened with only three children.²⁶ For the first five years of the school's existence, the student body rarely exceeded ten students, most of whom attended free of charge. He summed the difficulties he faced in Buenos Aires up in the same manner as he had in Montevideo. Parental selfishness he wrote continued to obstruct educational progress for the blind. Thus, like the classroom at the Asilo de Huérfanos, many of the blind that initially entered the school came from the ranks of the "abandoned" blind, or children who were left to fend for themselves when parents or

²⁴ Comisión Pro Homenaje al Prof. Francisco Gatti, 3; and Codino, *Memoria sobre enseñanza de ciegos. Es público y notorio que en 1901 fundé en esta capital el actual "Instituto Nacional de Ciegos," con mis recursos particulares que representaban los ahorros de diez años de incesante labor. Pero, muy pocos conocen la serie de penalidades y sacrificios que soporté para reunir un grupo de alumnos en mi escuela.*

²⁵ Gatti's departure from the SBC meant that the school at the Asilo was forced to find a new instructor. A dearth of trained experts continued to pose a problem for the classroom at the asylum. When Gatti decided to leave he convinced the socios to fill his position with two students who he personally trained in pedagogy for the blind, Angela Arce and Alejandro Balcarce. Gatti's influence in this matter was important because it maintained the practice of placing blind individuals in charge of the education of other blind individuals in the city, and it demonstrated Gatti's influence in matters pertaining to the blind in elite circles. He located his school at 1835 Independencia in the neighborhood of San Telmo.

²⁶ Comisión Pro Homenaje al Prof. Francisco Gatti, 2.

other family members felt they could not or would not provide support. To encourage parents to enroll their children the public needed better information about the possibilities of education for the blind. To Gatti, the best method to disseminate that information was to turn to the social and institutional tradition of blind public performance.

The tradition of blind public performance as a propaganda tool began with the first formal school in the world for the blind in the late eighteenth century. Its founder Valentine Huay, secured support for the school by holding public performances during which his first students read for the public, played music, or performed other tasks deemed impossible for a blind individual.²⁷ Like Huay's program in Paris, blind institutions in the United States and Europe recognized the value of such public performances early in the nineteenth century. Capitalizing on the popularity of the freak show, institutes like the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Massachusetts marketed the performances of students in concerts or through tours by the "respectable" classes. In doing so they mirrored the productions put on in P.T. Barnum's American Museum or in street fairs that reached to a mass audience.²⁸ Public performances by the blind portrayed a blind individual accomplishing a task that most sighted in the audience assumed required the use of sight. This was similar to the way in which the "Limbless Wonder" of the freak show poured himself a cup of tea, or how conjoined twins might perform a dance for the audience. Onlookers were supposed to be amazed by the impossible made possible. They were also comforted by the fact that the acts performed were daily tasks that their "superior" bodies performed easily. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson observed of the freak, "Whether generating awe, delight, terror or knowledge, the monstrous

²⁷ French, *The Education of the Blind*.

²⁸ Klages, *Woeful Afflictions*; Thomson, *Freakery*; and Trent, *The Manliest Man*.

emerges from culture-bound expectations even as it violates them."²⁹ Thus, while blind performance might instruct the audience that the blind were capable of far more than they previously imagined, it also reaffirmed that blindness was an inferior physical condition. The audience was comforted by the idea that the blind individual required extensive training in order to mirror sighted performance of mundane tasks.

When Gatti began performing his music in Argentina and Uruguay in the late nineteenth century the image of the blind in the popular imagination was extremely limited. For most of his audiences, their only encounters were with blind beggars. During all of his performances, whether they were musical or instructive, he read for the audience from Braille texts, demonstrated the use of the *puzón* (punch) to write in Braille and lectured on current pedagogical techniques for teaching the blind. Gatti understood these performances as educational propaganda and a form of public instruction. He viewed himself as an expert on blind education, having both experienced it and having received a license to teach the blind in Italy. His audiences were impressed by Gatti's performances and began to support the new institute with substantial donations. By 1907, the ICAS incorporated two new foundations, one male and one female, in which elite members of society aided fundraising efforts on behalf of the institution.

The success of his and his students' performances signaled to Gatti his acceptance in elite circles. With each performance or each donation from a member of these circles Gatti received confirmation that his expertise and talent were accepted, which he then conveyed to his mentor in Italy. In fact, as time proved, most elite members of society

²⁹ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error--A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 3.

viewed his performances and lectures as an extraordinary display of a blind man that mimicked but did not match that of a sighted man. All articles detailing Gatti's concerts never failed to remark on how well he played for a blind man. One newspaper account remarked, "In the musical literary part he showed his merits as a professor of the blind of the house and blind himself, H. Gatti."³⁰ Regardless of the context, blind performances were qualified by the individual performers position as blind. While he saw himself as an expert imparting wisdom, his audience was captivated by the act of a blind man reading, the impossible made possible, or showing off his merits. He did not succeed in convincing his audiences that he was their equal, just that he was an extra-ordinary blind man. As the director of a small private institution for the blind, Gatti was an acceptable substitute for a sighted expert. When politicians began to consider an expansive national institute, he proved insufficient.

A successful campaign of public performances expanded Gatti's support in elite circles though the school remained small. The additional support proved crucial because even with a small student body, his stage earnings barely covered the students' board and materials purchased from Europe.³¹ In 1904 the Argentine Congress issued the ICAS an eight hundred peso a month subsidy to cover rent for the school, a fact he recounted to his mentor demonstrating the importance Gatti placed on political recognition.³² As his school grew, however, Gatti found that he faced the same problem of staffing that the SBC faced decades earlier. There were still few acceptable professionals who could work

³⁰ "Asilo de Huérfanos," *La Prensa*, August 7, 1893, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 2/18/2016). *En la parte literaria musical lucieron sus méritos el profesor de ciegos de la casa y ciego el mismo H. Gatti.*

³¹ Gatti purchased all the material for the Instituto para Ciegos de Ambos Sexos "Francisco Gatti" from his former professor, Doménico Martuscelli, who used his European contacts to secure materials.

³² Letter from Gatti to Martuscellia, June 27, 1904.

in a school for the blind. He went to far as to ask Martuscellia, "I would like to ask another favor of you, that is to ask, if you might have in your institute two young women blind and orphaned, capable of teaching blind girls, one in women's work and the harp; the other in harmony and violin, because I want to hire them for my institute in advantageous conditions."³³ Gatti had special difficulties finding qualified female staff. The SBC's reluctance to enroll girls in its classroom meant that in earlier decades few women received a sufficient education to fill the roll of matron or teacher to a program for girls. It was in part the problem of staffing that lead Gatti to employ a family of sighted women recently emigrated from Montevideo. The family was composed of: Modesta San Roman, a Spanish immigrant to Montevideo; her eldest daughter Eva San Roman and Eva's half-sisters Amanda, María Esther, and Angela. When Gatti met the family following their arrival in Buenos Aires the family's condition was desperate. As Gatti had no female relatives of his own, he decided to take the family in and employ several of the sisters at the new institution. The three youngest daughters were better situated because they were the legitimate daughters of the marriage between their mother and Pedro Oliver. The eldest Eva was in a more tenuous position as the illegitimate offspring of her mother with whom she shared a last name.³⁴ Gatti asked Eva to act as matron and teacher for the female section at the school. Eva's lack of prior experience

³³ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Martuscellia, October 25, 1907, in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires. *Quisiera otro favor de usted, es decir, si en su Instituto hubiera dos señoritas ciegas y huérfanas, capaces de enseñar a niñas ciegas, una para trabajos de mujeres y arpa; y la otra armonio y violín, porque quiero contratarlas para mi Instituto en ventajosas condiciones.*

³⁴ Uruguay Baptisms, 1750-1900, FamilySearch.org, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/list/?page=1&countryId=1927142> (accessed 01/21/2015); Argentina, Capital Federal, Catholic Church Records, 1737-1977, FamilySearch.org, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/list/?page=1&countryId=1927142> (accessed 01/21/2015); and Argentina Marriages, 1722-1911, FamilySearch.org, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/list/?page=1&countryId=1927142> (accessed 01/21/2015).

working with the blind made it necessary for Gatti to provide extensive training and guidance. By 1905, Eva San Roman had become an integral fixture of the school. Eva was a competent head of house for the female section, allowing his institution to more closely mirror most of those in Europe that were also divided according to sex. This aided the promotion of the school to the general public.

From Francisco Gatti's perspective, Eva San Roman was a safe choice as a subordinate. Though letters indicate he may have preferred blind women trained in Europe, because Eva was an impoverished female immigrant of ambiguous parentage Gatti believed she would be open to his tutelage. He could teach San Roman to be exactly the kind of matron he envisioned for the position. As events unfolded Gatti reflected back on this period stating,

In my naïveté I never suspected that such evil from a woman who owes me everything, I housed her family in my home, moved to mercy by their misery. I freely offered everything, roof and food as well as to her family, I taught her literature and music and all the methods of the blind, I recommended her to public functionaries to facilitate the way so that she could improve her economic situation...³⁵

Gatti expected that by helping her and her family to acquire decent wages and stable living arrangements he secured their loyalty and gratitude. Additionally, as a white European male he did not anticipate that Eva could pose a threat to his authority within an institution he ostensibly owned. Unfortunately for Gatti, as the ICAS's reputation spread beyond the small circles of the elite attached to its patronato, Eva San Roman garnered as much press attention as did Gatti. In an article written for *Caras y Caretas* in

³⁵ Letter from Gatti to Martuscelli, December 8, 1912. *En mi ingenuidad jamás supuse tanta maldad de una mujer que me lo debía todo, porque la hospedé con su familia en mi casa, movido por la piedad por su miseria. Le ofrecí gratuitamente todo, techo y comida como también a su familia, le enseñe literatura y música y todos los métodos para el ciego, la recomendé a funcionarios públicos para facilitarle un camino por el cual pudiera mejorar su situación económica* [sic].

1907, the caption of a photo of the students and staff at the ICAS listed Eva San Roman as the *directora* and Francisco Gatti as a professor. Gatti failed to calculate the assumptions that the Argentine liberal professionals made regarding his abilities to act independently and competently in his own field of expertise.

Nationalization

In early 1908 national deputy Pastor Lacasa approached Gatti about the possibility of nationalization for the now over-stretched Instituto para Ciegos de Ambos Sexos. Lacasa was a trusted associate who served on the Gentleman's Commission of the Patronato de Ciegos at the ICAS. According to Gatti,

They offered to nationalize my school urging me on so that I would donate all of the stock of the institute to the highest levels of government in the Nation, who were to keep for me due consideration as the founder and donator of the institution, reserving for me my post of Director in recompense for my generous action and long educational labor in the country.³⁶

Gatti had little reason to distrust him. The possibility of nationalization fired Gatti's imagination because it placed him at the verge of national prestige. In letters sent to his mentor throughout the following two years he detailed his plans for expanding his institution with the infusion of federal funds. He wanted to create a printing press, build a kindergarten, expand workshop facilities, and he sent away to Italy for the necessary material.³⁷ He envisioned a comprehensive institution that would eventually rival any built in Europe, and he would of course be its director and founder.

³⁶ Gatti, Carta abierta. *Me ofreció nacionalizar mi escuela instándome para que hiciera donación de todas las existencias de la misma al superior gobierno de la Nación, quien me habría guardado las debidas consideraciones como fundador y donante de la Institución, conservándome además mi puesto de Director en recompensa de mi generosa acción y larga labor educacional en el país.*

When Lacasa proposed the nationalization of the ICAS in 1908, members of Congress were more open to the idea than they had been in 1903. Over the course of the first decade of the twentieth century schools for "weak" children, such as the blind or intellectually disabled, began to become an issue of national importance. Early reformers like Emelio Coni, Cecilia Grierson, and Ulises J. Codino each demonstrated in their own writings, concern that Argentina had yet to match the level of specialization achieved in European nations. By 1908, Chile and Brazil, countries Argentina tended to view as their peers on the international stage, had each created national institutions for the blind. For many politicians the existence of specialized national institutions for specific populations were necessary benchmarks of modernity and a test of Argentina's supposedly advanced position vis-à-vis its neighbors. Opening remarks of the Congressional debate challenged dissenters who wanted to delay the national institute stating, "Indubitably, mister president, it is not possible in this state of thing with respect to an area as important as special education, because all of the educated nations of Europe and the Americas, especially in Brazil and Chile, have set us an example, establishing institutions for the blind perfectly organized and supported by national authority."³⁸

Despite concern about Argentina's competitive edge, Law Project 5796 was only viable because the success of ICAS provided an ideal platform for a national institute without necessitating significant expenditure. Article five of the law project literally stated, "The blind institute that actually exists in Flores, with its national pension, will

³⁷ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Marstucelli, January 21, 1908, in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires.

³⁸ Argentina, "Instituto Nacional de Ciegos," September 16, 1908, *Diario De Sesiones De La Cámara De Diputados*, (Buenos Aires), 1236. *Indudablemente, señor presidente, no era posible en este estado de cosas respecto de una rama tan importante de la enseñanza especial, porque todas las naciones cultas de la Europa y las de América, especialmente el Brasil y Chile, nos han dado el ejemplo, estableciendo institutos de ciegos perfectamente organizadas sostenidos por los poderes nacionales.*

serve as the training establishment and base of the national institute of the blind."³⁹ The law did relatively little to expand on operations already in existence at the institute. Despite the acknowledged need for more specialized services such as a kindergarten or a teacher's college, Lacasa and the commission who examined the bill felt that it was not the time to shift more than minimal funding to the blind, as long as the country still faced literacy issues among normal school age children. In writing the legislation that changed the name of the Instituto para Ciegos de Ambos Sexos, "Francisco Gatti" to the Instituto Nacional para Ciegos, congress sought to utilize the resources and labor of Francisco Gatti to shore up a modernization project that few legislators deemed overtly important.

The main source of conflict regarding the 1908 legislation to convert Gatti's institution into a national institution revolved around Gatti's position as director. The opinions of Argentine professionals writing about the education of the blind in the first part of the decade continued to influence law makers perspectives about the place of gender and disability in positions of authority at national institutes. Ulises J. Codino's observations about the importance of sighted directors at blind institutes still had relevance five years later. When Lacasa presented law 5796 to Congress the law made no provision to maintain Gatti in the position of director of the institution he created. It did not provide any means to reimburse Gatti for his financial investment into the materials, infrastructure, and maintenance of the ICAS, a value that Gatti estimated at twenty-five thousand pesos.⁴⁰ Instead the legislation placed Gatti's protégé, Eva San Roman, in the position of director. Specifically, the legislation created two sections, the female section

³⁹ Ibid., 1235. *El instituto de ciegos que actualmente existe en Flores, con su pensión nacional, servirá de plantel y base al instituto nacional de ciegos.*

⁴⁰ Gatti, Carta abierta. Law project 5796 was written by diputado Lacasa and diputado Eduardo Acosta, both members of the Gentleman's Division of the Patronato de Ciegos at the ICAS.

headed by Eva San Roman under the title of director and a male section headed by Gatti under the title of vice-director subordinate to the female director. The female director earned three hundred pesos monthly, while the male vice-director earned two hundred and fifty pesos monthly.⁴¹

The decision to place Eva San Roman at the head of the first national institute for the blind was a surprising choice. As demonstrated in chapter one, the liberal oligarchy tended to accept women in positions of authority at social institutions if those institutions maintained at least seemed to function out of the private sector. Public institutions were strictly reserved for male authority. Additionally, even when women controlled social institutions, class played a significant role in their acceptability in those situations. Female institutional administrators were expected to represent the *gente decente* (decent people) of the middle and upper levels of society. Eva San Roman's gender, questionable paternity, immigrant status, and relative poverty all seemed contrary to typical qualifications common to professionals of comparable public institutes in Argentina or to the qualifications detailed in Grierson and Codino's projects earlier in the decade.⁴² Unlike her white, male, European trained counterpart Francisco Gatti however, Eva San Roman could see.

The appointment of Eva San Roman as director under the legal project caused the only objection, bordering on ridicule, to Lacasa's legislation. In an otherwise uncontested bill, national deputy Piñero was disturbed by the idea that this legislation placed a female in charge of a national institute. He stated, "This is a honest contradiction. If the women's department has a female director, then the men's department should have a male

⁴¹ Argentina, "Instituto Nacional de Ciegos," 1235-1236.

⁴² Instituto Nacional para Sordomudos, Instituto para los Retardados, etc.

director, and the female should be subordinate to the male. This is an excess of feminism or feminism inverted. In this project you alter the universal order; that where there is a man and a woman the man should mandate."⁴³ Lacasa reacted to Piñero's statement with confusion and asked the deputy to clarify whether or not he was requesting that the article be changed such that the new institute might have two directors. Piñero responded saying, "Perfectly; but if you are going to have a general director, let it be a man, unless the deputy would like to go against his own sex," earning him a laugh from the assembly.⁴⁴

For Piñero it was incomprehensible to establish a national institute directed by a female with subordinate male administrators. The distinction between national institutes directly funded and run by the government and institutions fully subsidized and run by non-governmental organizations was important to the gendered dynamics of institutional authority. Though both operated as arms of the state, the fact that organizations like the SBC maintained a rhetorical veil of charity allowed the federal government to do two things in addition to cutting cost. First it prevented governmental bodies from committing to the provision of certain social services. Subsidies could be revoked. Charities could close. Subsidized social services were a public gift not a governmental obligation. As such the government could support the "charitable" institutions of organizations controlled by women without seeming to give political control or power to those organizations. In reality the social service apparatus, especially that in Buenos

⁴³ Argentina, "Instituto Nacional de Ciegos," 1237. *Esto es una verdadera contradicción. Si el departamento de mujeres tiene una directora, el departamento de varones debe tener un director, y á éste debe estar subordinada aquélla. Esto es exceso de feminismo, ó feminismo invertido. En este proyecto se altera esto que es de orden universal; que donde hay un hombre y una mujer, es el hombre el que debe mandar.*

⁴⁴ Ibid. *Perfectamente; pero si ha de haber un director general, que sea hombre, aunque el señor diputado quiera ir en contra de su sexo.*

Aires, would collapse if the government ceased to subsidize so-called charitable organizations. Thus, subsidies allowed the government to utilize the labor and skills of broader segments of the middle and upper classes without subverting norms regarding professional authority proliferated by European social scientists, physical scientists, and medical practitioners. In the case of the SBC that labor was female, in that of the ICAS it was blind labor. While they subsidized a wide number of private organizations they maintained an array of government-operated institutions that conformed to the type of masculine institutional authority modeled by European and U.S. institutions and deemed necessary for a modern nation state. Ideally, any national institute would join the ranks of the male dominated institutions that served as the centerpieces of Argentine modernization.

When it came time for deputy Lacasa to respond to Piñero's sharp objection to a female director he explained to deputy Piñero that these were extraordinary circumstances because the male vice-director in question was blind. According to Lacasa and his fellow deputies, Gatti's blindness was a larger obstacle to the administration of a national institute than Eva San Roman's lower middle-class femaleness. In other words, Gatti's blindness trumped his credentials as the founder of the current institute, his seventeen years as an educator of the blind in Argentina and at the most basic level his manhood. When asked why a suitable male director could not be found Lacasa explained, "We are unable to do this at this moment because we don't have the necessary time nor does their exist in this country personnel competent enough to definitively establish an institute of this class."⁴⁵ Gatti's European training and years of service did little to off-set

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1238. *No podía hacerlo en este momento, porque no tenia el tiempo necesario ni existe en el país personal bastante competente para establecer definitivamente un instituto de esa clase.*

the "problem" of his blindness. As in the case of the Asilo de Huérfanos twenty years prior, lack of technically trained individuals with experience in specialized education meant that other wise deeply held principles on the part of the deputies, in this case their objection to female directors of national institutes, were suspended in favor of extraordinary circumstances.

Despite Lacasa's defense of the project as written, he conceded deputy Piñero's point and assured his colleagues that the legislation was written in such a way that when it came time to establish an official reglamento, the abnormality would be corrected because, "the direction of an institute of this nature should be male."⁴⁶ In defense of the special arrangement and to reassure a still doubtful Piñero, Lacasa promised the chamber that during its seven years of operation the "lady who will lead, as well as the gentleman who is vice-director, are very meritorious."⁴⁷ Further, he assured the assembly, they sacrificed much in order to maintain the institution with only two paying students, the remainder receiving their education for free.

Gatti's Response

Between 1908 and 1910, Francisco Gatti continued to act as the director of the institute and was unaware of the dramatic changes ushered in by the passage of Law 5796. He wrote his mentor in July of 1909 to inform him that he could direct his correspondence to "Francisco Gatti Director of the Insitito Nacional de Niños Ciegos de ambos sexos." Further he stated regarding the institute "...it is always beneath my direction and that of an esteemed "señorita" with whom I associate to better watch the

⁴⁶ Ibid. *...la dirección de un instituto de esta naturaleza debe ser masculina.*

⁴⁷ Ibid. *...señora que esta enfrente, así como el señor que está de vice director, son muy meritorios.*

women and general moral condition of the school."⁴⁸ During this period he followed through with many of the plans he developed for the national institute following his initial discussion with Lacasa about nationalization. He acquired a new printing press by writing to the Queen of Romania; he made preparations to install a kindergarten; and began the process of moving the school into a much larger facility. He was asked to give a speech at the Ministro de la Instrucción Pública and he turned down a request by a "very rich man" in Colombia to travel there to help establish blind education in the country.⁴⁹ In the two years prior to his actual demotion, Gatti was extremely content and pleased with the increased interest in the inner workings of his institution. He took public interest as a sign of his own success. In 1910, when he discovered his demotion, he was devastated. He wrote, "...how many bitternesses.... how many disillusionments...how many humiliations I have suffered."⁵⁰ He pinned not only his personal and professional aspirations on the directorship, but much of his personal wealth was tied to the materials that would now transfer to the national institute. The new law made no provision to compensate Gatti for the lost money, and in fact it decreased his monthly income. Instead of viewing the injustice of his new situation as a product of prejudice against the blind, Gatti interpreted his misfortune through much more personal experiences. First, he blamed personal relationships but as time moved on he began to extrapolate from his

⁴⁸ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Maruscelli, July 5, 1909, in "Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido," unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires.

⁴⁹ Ibid. That man was likely Juan Antonio Pardo Ospina. Ospina was blind and the son of a Colombian coffee magnet. He did eventually found the first institute for the blind in the country in 1926 establishing the Instituto para Niños Ciegos "Juan Antonio Pardo Ospina."

⁵⁰ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Maruscelli, May 11, 1911, in "Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido," unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires. ...*cuántas amarguras...cuantos desengaños...cuantas humillaciones he sufrido.*

broader experience as an immigrant in a foreign land and as a man in what he deemed a land for women.

Gatti's reaction to the bill was important because it showed the ways in which Gatti's multiple identities as a European immigrant, as a white male, as a professional, and as a member of the middle class superseded that of his identity as a blind man in his interpretation of his personal losses. Gatti consistently characterized himself as the professional expert who immigrated to the Americas to bring hope to the uneducated blind of the New World. As someone trained in a European institution he believed himself to be superior to the Argentines he encountered and expected that his expertise would be recognized as superior. His demotion in the nationalization process was therefore incomprehensible to him. To explain the unexplainable he turned to his personal relationship with the woman who usurped him and his observations of Argentine culture as an immigrant.

He initially claimed that his trouble began with his marriage in the spring of 1910. According to Gatti's accounts and those of his new father-in-law Eustaquio Vicente Satéramo, Gatti's marriage eroded what was left of an already tense working situation within the ICAS/INC. He believed the nature of the legislation in 1908 was the result of a love triangle between himself, Eva San Roman, and Pastor Lacasa. During her training process Gatti claims that Eva San Roman fell in love with him, a sentiment that was not shared. At the same time the married Lacasa developed feelings for San Roman, but San Roman's family background and social status meant that even as a mistress she was unsuitable. Gatti insisted that Lacasa and San Roman conspired to remove him as a way of improving her social position in order to make their affair more acceptable. Between

1908 and 1910, San Roman supposedly continued to hope that Gatti would turn his attention to her, allowing her to leave Lacasa. When Gatti married he believed he angered Eva San Roman into her first actions as the new director of the INC. She fired Eustaquio Satéramo his father-in-law and a blind instructor at the institute. The Satéramo family lost their principle source of income and Eustaquio was unable to find work to replace his earnings at the INC. As a result the family was forced to move in with Gatti and his wife, a situation that lasted several years. Gatti's belief that his demotion was the result of a personal vendetta was deepened through his extended families shared acceptance of the story. His loss became the family's loss.

Imbedded in Gatti's story of a love triangle was disgust that this woman he trained as a subordinate would have the ingratitude to accept a position of authority over him, "I took her from misery, and maybe also shame, as her later bad intentions warned, and now...ah, human ingratitude."⁵¹ From Gatti's perspective every aspect of San Roman's identity, her gender, her social position, her economic condition, her lack of education made her his inferior. When he showed her kindness and elevated her position (though not to the level of his own), she then owed him gratitude and loyalty. Gatti's opinion was not dissimilar to the way in which institutional authorities insisted that demonstrations of gratitude and loyalty were the hallmarks of well-adjusted recipients of institutional aid.⁵²

Gatti's ire expanded beyond the actions of San Roman herself to the system that allowed her and her supposed lover to achieve such a coup over him. He claimed,

⁵¹ Letter Francisco Gatti to Doménico Martuscelli, December 8, 1912. *La saqué de la miseria, y quizá también de la vergüenza, porque advertir posteriormente de sus malas inclinaciones, y ahora.....* [sic] *Ah, la ingratitude humana.*

⁵² See introduction for a detailed discussion about gratitude within institutional establishments.

Finally I perceived her full plans, as well as her hidden ambitions, working in bad faith and ingratitude, but as you know excessive ambition does not have scruples and a young woman can do anything, especially in this country, that many call: "Hell for horses, purgatory for men, and paradise for women."⁵³

Though the saying Gatti used more commonly referred to the ratio of men to women in the country, he deployed it with much the same sentiment as expressed by male professionals since the second half of the nineteenth century about female figures working in the social services. There was a perception among these professionals that within areas such as education, health care, and services for the poor that Argentine women from the middle and upper classes wielded a disproportionate amount of power compared to their peers in the Americas and Europe.⁵⁴ Like these men, Gatti felt that his demotion during the nationalization process was the result of unchecked female authority in these fields rather than as exemplary of the preference for a sighted body over a blind one. He perceived that it was a particular Argentine preference for female authority in these social service sectors that allowed an ambitious young woman like Eva San Roman to gain the upper hand in an institution of his creation. His belief was further intensified by the years which he spent teaching at the Asilo de Huérfanos where he was under several layers of female authority. Though he speaks little of those years, the fate of his predecessor Juan Lorenzo y Gonzalez was exemplary of the power that female leadership could exercise, particularly over a man with a disability.⁵⁵

⁵³ Letter Francisco Gatti to Doménico Martuscelli, December 8, 1912. *Finalmente obtuvo sus designios colmando así sus ambiciones ocultas con su trabajo de mala fe e ingratitude, pero usted sabe que la ambición desmedida no tiene escrúpulos y que una mujer joven lo puede todo [sic], especialmente en este país, que muchos llaman: "Infierno de los caballos; purgatorio de los hombres, y paraíso de las mujeres."*

⁵⁴ See Pita 100-103; Ablard 45-50; and Domingo F. Sarmiento, "La Sociedad de Beneficencia," *Obras de D.F. Sarmiento*, vol. 52 (Buenos Aires, Establecimiento Poligráfico, 1902) 239-244.

⁵⁵ See, Chapter One, 77-78.

Though Gatti saw himself as the equal to the professional men, they did not see him or his situation in the same manner. Gatti did not understand the strength that U.S. and Northern European bias against blind administrators played in his demotion. Instead, he believed that the nationalization legislation was evidence of the corruptibility of the Argentine political system. He was sure that his status as a European with backing in political and elite social circles was enough to earn him respect as the expert on blind issues in the country. He therefore concluded, during these initial years, that the bill that passed Congress demonstrated the ease with which a single senator such as Lacasa could persuade his fellow colleagues to act against a logical and just course of action and pursue instead an avenue advantageous to only a few. Again he came to understand his demotion not in terms of his blindness, but in terms of his foreignness. In 1889, when he left France for Montevideo, he believed that living in the Americas as an educated and talented man could balance the reality of his blindness and open doors to him that were not available in his country of origin. Throughout his writings he persistently asserts his role as the founder of blind education in the country and routinely ignores the Argentines who did or attempted to start such programs prior to his arrival. Overall, his attitude suggests that while the Argentines who surrounded him may have seen him as inferior, he in turn saw most Argentines as inferior. He believed that his European education and pedigree trumped or should trump his blindness within the context of the Americas. The reality that it did not was too difficult for Gatti to accept.

Erasure

After San Roman officially took over as director of the Insitito Nacional para Ciegos in 1910, the relationship between Francisco Gatti and Eva San Roman eroded. In letters home Gatti described his working situation as nearly unbearable, though he was afraid to leave as he was now the sole earner for both his own family and that of his in-laws. For her part Eva San Roman began to take measures to solidify her authority at the INC and erase from the public's mind the role Francisco Gatti played in its construction. To Gatti, San Roman's actions seemed like the erasure of what hope he had left of a legacy. In a letter written in 1914 Gatti states,

As for myself, [life] is materially good but not so morally because the woman who I spoke to you of before will not leave me in peace and tries to hurt me in any way she can. She attributes to herself all of the merits and the recognition that in justice only apply to me. She has mystified the real goings on and has discredited in whatever manner she can with all parties, taking from me in this manner all the good that I had received, this black ingratitude distresses me immensely.⁵⁶

Whenever San Roman had the opportunity to overview the history of education for the blind in Argentina, she never acknowledged Gatti's role at the ICAS. Either she ignored the institution that preceded the INC and spoke only of the classroom at the Asilo de Huérfanos or she insinuated for the press or in publications that the ICAS was her creation. Between 1910 and 1914, the INC never mentioned Gatti's name and projects either begun or established during his tenure as director was attributed to the new directora.

⁵⁶ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Martuscelli, July 19, 1914, in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires. *En cuanto a mí, materialmente estoy bien con mi familia, pero no así moralmente, porque aquella de la cual le he hablado en otra carta mía, no me deja en paz, y me hace todo el daño que puede. Se atribuye todos los méritos y el reconocimiento que a mí solo corresponde en justicia. Ella mistifica los hechos reales y trata de desprestigiarme de cualquier manera por todas partes, retribuyéndome así todo el bien que ha recibido de mí. esta [sic] negra ingratitud me aflige inmensamente.*

Gatti's erasure by San Roman demonstrated the sighted public's willingness to accept and forget about the blind immigrant. In a pleading letter to his mentor, Gatti acknowledged the erasure and appeared to be fearful that his mentor would come to believe that years worth of letters were fantasies created by Gatti to impress. To counter that possibility he sent copies of news articles from 1903, clearly demonstrating his position as the director of the institute and praising his hard work in its construction. In happier times he claimed that the success of the ICAS meant that, "therefore I can die in peace because I am sure that I left, like you, a respectable name, having assured the luck of the blind in this country."⁵⁷ The loss of his position at the INC was a cruel blow to him, but the loss of his legacy left him embittered.

The Mendoza Project

As San Roman shored up her position at the INC, reformers more sympathetic to Francisco Gatti began to investigate the education of the blind more deeply. As they did they began to articulate flaws in the legislation that created the new institute. Law 5796 provided for the creation of the Insitito Nacional para Ciegos, but essentially formalized education for the blind already in place in Buenos Aires. Advocates for the blind wanted more comprehensive social programs that rivaled the most expansive programs offered elsewhere in the world, and the passage of law 5796 provided hope that they could achieve those goals. The most enthusiastic advocate for the expansion of social programs was a friend and advocate of Francisco Gatti's. His name was José Pérez Mendoza and in 1913 he set out to dramatically expand social programs for the blind to include blind

⁵⁷ Letter from Francisco Gatti to Doménico Martuscelli, September 1909, in "Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido," unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos. *...entonces sí me podré morir en paz porque estará seguro que dejo como usted un nombre respetable.*

individuals of all ages in all the provinces of the country. In doing so he came into direct conflict with Eva San Roman at the INC. Their public battle over Mendoza's own legislative proposal, law project 9339, propelled the blind cause into the public eye and shifted the public attitude toward the blind from apathy to advocacy.

José Pérez Mendoza was a member of elite circles who retired at the age of 40 to pursue philanthropy.⁵⁸ Over the course of his life he was the President of the *Sociedad para la Protección de Animales* (The Society for the Protection of Animals), the *Sociedad de Ajedrez Argentina* (The Argentina Chess Society), and the first president of the *Asociación Argentina de Cremación* (Argentine Cremation Society). It was as the President of the Sociedad de Ajedrez that Mendoza first came into contact with blind education. In 1910, Mendoza was invited to the INC to teach the students how to play chess.⁵⁹ His one-time visit became a standing engagement and the students not only enjoyed the game but they excelled. The intellectual capacity of the student so impressed Mendoza that he developed a keen interest in expanding his knowledge about blind education. To do so he did as many reformers before him, he set out on a multi-month tour of European and U.S. institutions for the blind to learn more about their education.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Juan Sebastián Morgado, *Luces y Sombras de Ajedrez en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Dunken, 2014), <http://wordpress.ajedrez-de-estilo.com.ar/index.php/2014/04/28/novedad-luces-y-sombras-del-ajedrez-argentino/> (accessed 2/9/2015), 1.

⁵⁹ "Club Argentino de Ajedrez," June 20, 1910, *La Nación*, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 10/19/2012).

⁶⁰ For more information on the Argentine grand tour see, Leandro Losada, *La alta sociedad en la Buenos Aires de la Belle Epoque* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editora Iberoamericana, 2008), 151-166. Tours of this nature were an established trend among the upper sectors of Buenos Aires' elite circles. Typically they preceded the creation of a new institution or the opening of a project. They were conducted by either men or women and were most frequently paid for by the traveling individual though they were on occasion sponsored by a public or private entity. On returning from the trip, which almost always comprised stops in at least four countries, the individual wrote a detailed account of their experiences and observations, either for publication or to be dispersed to members of an organizing committee. Generally, members of the elite then accepted the person who conducted the travel as an expert on the topic.

Mendoza returned from his tour with a wide array of plans and ideas. In the U.S. and Europe he saw programs for people of all ages and capacities. His experiences led him to the conclusion that Argentina was in a unique position to create the most expansive and effective institution for the blind. He decided to call this creation the Instituto Argentino para Ciegos. The institution would serve as an umbrella organization that would centralize the distribution of a myriad of services for the blind. Mendoza envisioned a colony for the blind that would contain, a kindergarten, workshops to train and re-train the adult blind, a library, medical services, housing opportunities and more. He also believed the IAC could serve as an oversight body for any schools built in the provinces, and for any already in existence. Separated from the context of the single institution, many of Mendoza's proposals were not new.⁶¹ Most of the projects were proposed first by Francisco Gatti for the INC, and Eva San Roman continued to believe that institution could serve as the central conduit for services to the blind. However, San Roman's conception of how to deliver those services was different. Rather than form the proposed kindergarten and workshops for adults as separate entities, the INC simply adopted a more open policy of accepting students, particularly adult students, without adjusting their curriculum or establishing separate structures. To accommodate the new admissions the INC acquired a larger facility but did not pursue the construction of separate spaces for its varied pupils.

Mendoza was frustrated by the stagnation of progress at the INC. He believed that his new legislation would re-energize the expansion of services for the blind along the lines of Gatti's original vision. In fact, when Mendoza began to promote his legislation in

⁶¹ Included in the proposal was the creation of a kindergarten, acquisition of a printing press, the establishment of adult workshops and course, homes for the elderly, a free eye clinic, and more.

1913, he did so by reintroducing Gatti to the public as an important figure in the creation of education for the blind in Argentina. This directly contradicted the image that Eva San Roman was attempting to convey. Though he routinely stated for the press that he did not wish to challenge the authority of San Roman at the INC, in his proposal he placed the INC under the direction of the IAC, which severely divided the law projects authors from the Ministry of Public Instruction's committee alternative version of the law project. The MIP investigative committee felt that there was little need to place all services for the blind under a central authority and therefore wrote the subordination of the INC to the IAC out of their draft. They argued that overlapping and redundant services were not unusual in specialized services. More importantly, provincial authorities should be allowed to determine the direction of their own institutes without being beholden to a central federal authority. Deputy Agote, the deputy who introduced the legislation, argued that the unique character of the blind made an institution for the blind distinct from other specialized institutions. Specifically, "The blind man, mister president, through his absence of sight, is obligated to develop his movements in an extremely limited orbit."⁶² The limited nature of blind lives necessitated services and instruction that were homogenous in order for the blind to live in community. The Ministry of Public Instruction, the authority in charge of the INC, did not have the expertise to ensure that blind education maintained the uniformity and consistency necessary to produce a successful program. According to Agote, only the IAC would be able to direct education properly across the country.

⁶² Argentina, "Instituto para Ciegos," September 26, 1913, *Diario De Sesiones De La Cámara De Diputados* (Buenos Aires): 570. *El ciego, señor presidente, por la ausencia del sentido de la vista, está obligado a desenvolver su acción dentro de una órbita perfectamente determinada limitadísima.*

As a result of the challenge to her authority Eva San Roman began a publicity campaign in and around Buenos Aires to challenge the campaign driven by Mendoza. She hosted several talks in which she expounded the excellent work done at the INC to educate the blind, while also discussing ways in which the INC could be expanded to be more effective.⁶³ In a well-publicized trip to Montevideo, students from the INC performed in a benefit concert to help Sra. Teresa Santos de Bosch raise funds to begin a school for the blind there.⁶⁴ Articles regarding the concert lauded the efforts of the INC and marveled at the skills of its students. San Roman's campaign was designed to demonstrate that her institution was capable of serving as the center of exactly the type of institution desired by Mendoza without the need to create a separate entity. In an article discussing San Roman's concerns, a journalist from the *La Nación* argued that the directora did not see the necessity of the proposed Instituto Argentino de Ciegos and was confident that between the existing Patronato Argentino de Ciegos and the INC the proposed expansion of blind services was possible. Further she emphasized in both speeches and in the press the importance of trained and experienced personnel in the education of the blind. This particular point was a veiled critique of Mendoza who boasted neither training nor experience in the field. In the end, San Roman's position was stronger in the legislative process and when law 9339 passed in 1913 the INC remained under the control of the Ministry of Public Instruction rather than the IAC.

Despite the INC's success at remaining separate from the IAC, the passage of the legislation seemed to spell out a new era in services for the blind. Law 9339 pledged the

⁶³ Many of these ideas were those of Francisco Gatti, who in conjunction with his former mentor at the school in Naples began the process of putting those ideas into action years prior to San Roman's ascendance to the directorship.

⁶⁴ "Instrucción publica: INC visita a Montevideo," *La Prensa*, November 29, 1913, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/20/2012).

creation of kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools large enough to educate thousands of blind children living throughout the entire nation. It promised the creation of housing facilities, workshops for the adult blind, reeducation programs, medical facilities, and old age homes. Unlike Congressional deputies in 1908, Mendoza did not want to simply mirror European and U.S. institutions. He wanted to improve on them by creating a centralized body that could oversee and promote social services for the blind at every stage of life. He claimed that his plan was the first of its kind. Unlike previous projects, Mendoza's proposals differentiated experiences of blindness and attempted to account for individuals who lost their sight at different stages in their life. Previous projects focused entirely on blindness acquired in childhood, but the legislation created mechanisms to aid workers who lost their sight in work accidents and the elderly who lost their sight as a result of geriatric conditions. Law 9339 set entirely new discussions before the public and the blind community about the diversity of experiences of blindness and social responsibility to those experiences. However, almost as soon as the legislation passed Mendoza faced a battle with the MIP to implement even the simplest sections of the legislation.

The Minister of Public Instruction was sympathetic to arguments against further institutionalization of services for the blind and accepted Eva San Roman's assertion that the INC could absorb projects into its operations. He saw little need for the creation of a new institution and was reluctant to incorporate an institution that contained several entities that had little to do with either justice or public instruction. As a result he would not appoint a directive committee for the Instituto Argentina para Ciegos, nor did he allot

land for the construction of the proposed edifices.⁶⁵ In desperation Mendoza attempted to circumvent the authority of the minister by generating an honorary directive committee that was approved by the office of the vice-president of the nation.

Mendoza responded to stalling from the MIP with a substantial and thorough press blitz. Mendoza levied his elite position to enlist the two major presses, *La Prensa* and *La Nación*, in an extensive media campaign. For weeks Mendoza peppered the papers with articles about the blind. Some detailed institutions in Europe and the United States. Others gave the history of global blind education. He also included scientific articles that discussed the operation of the senses and the use of touch among the blind. Many of the articles were personal accounts of his experiences with the blind. In each Mendoza concluded with a few paragraphs detailing his own plans for institutional expansion of services to the blind in Argentina. Throughout the press campaign the honorary committee pushed forward with plans that did not require facilities or substantial funding.

Mendoza hoped that the creation of the honorary committee was a sign of progress but his principal goal was to begin construction on the new edifices of the IAC. Blocked by the MIP and lacking the personal resources to move forward the IAC project seemed to reach an impasse. Then in 1914 an internal investigation at the Instituto Nacional para Ciegos revealed that Eva San Roman (director), D. Hugo Sperolli (secretary) and Amanda San Roman (economist) had embezzled substantial funds from

⁶⁵ José Pérez Mendoza, *Por los ciegos de la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Boullosa, 1917); "La asistencia de los ciegos: En cumplimiento de una ley," *La Nación*, March 3, 1914, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/21/2012); "Por los ciegos: La ley 9339," *La Prensa*, March 10, 1914, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/21/2012).

the institute.⁶⁶ In a quandary over what to do about the institute officials at the MIP decided to return to the suggestion made by deputy Agote and Mendoza during the hearings regarding law 9339. They placed the INC under the control of the IAC and its directive committee. Control of the INC gave the IAC a role beyond committee meetings and educational pamphlets. It also provided a physical space for the organization to occupy while it waited for the provision of a piece of land by the federal government.

Unfortunately for Francisco Gatti, however, the removal of Eva San Roman and the ascendance of his one time advocate José Pérez Mendoza did not signal a change in his own fortunes. After gaining control of the INC, Mendoza reorganized the institution's administrative structure again. He hired a new director, another woman but this time without any training in special education. He made himself the vice-director of the institute and head of the boy's section. Gatti was made the new technical director of instruction and piano teacher. Subsequent reorganizations of the institution pushed Gatti further from his original position as director and placed increasing numbers of sighted, untrained Argentines in positions of authority over him. Later in life he began to understand his misfortunes less and less from the perspective of personal animosities and national differences. In 1938, two years before his death, he wrote to Dr. Adrian C. Escobar then president of the Patronato de Ciegos and conservative politician. He hoped to secure work for one of his sons. In describing his misfortunes in that letter he stated, "My blindness did not save me from trouble, on the contrary, it provided incentive for the

⁶⁶ "Instituto Nacional de Ciegos," *La Prensa*, October 10, 1914, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/20/2012); "El Patronato Argentino de Ciegos: Anexión del instituto," *La Nación*, October 11, 1914, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/21/2012).

intrigues, bad faith, and unjustified animosity that surrounded me with a tenacity not worthy of the cause."⁶⁷

Conclusion

The first decade of the twentieth century was a key period in the development of specifically Argentine social services for the blind. During this decade sighted reformers and advocates argued the need for new institutes and intuitions on the basis of Argentina's need to match its neighbors in the southern hemisphere. Chile and Brazil already had national institutes for the blind and reformers like Ulysses J. Codino understood such institutes as signs of modernizing nations based on orderly principles, which divided national populaces into categories and provided for those categories according to the national good. Argentine politicians were keen to be viewed by nations in Europe as the country leading the way in the American South so that existence of institutions in Chile and Brazil became powerful symbols to urge action in Argentine Congressional circles. In the general populace, however, it was not enough to argue for an institution on principles of competitive nation building. The liberal oligarchy and professional sectors, had to be convinced of the utility of these institutions. Newspapers and magazines began to publish articles drew on the tradition of sympathetic writing to garner that public support and by the end of the decade many readers were ready to support the expansion of blind services for the perceived good of the blind population in Argentina.

⁶⁷ Letter to Dr. Adrian C. Escobar from Francisco Gatti, August 3, 1938, Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires. *Mi condición de ciego no fue óbice para que se me ahorraran disgustos, por el contrario, constituyó un aliciente para que las intrigas, la mala fe y la animosidad injustificada rodeara mi persona con una tenacidad digna de mejor causa.*

The perception that Argentina both needed and was beginning to be open to the idea of social services for the blind was one of the elements that drew Francisco Gatti south from Montevideo following his initial stop there. He, like so many other immigrants, viewed the Americas as a place of expanded opportunity where old world restrictions and limitations could be circumvented. He believed that if he could not find respectable employment in Italy, he would be able to find it in a country where his training and skills were unique and desired. It is clear from his writings that he believed that his expertise would, in the minds of those he needed to persuade, outweigh any prejudices against his blindness. In the Americas, an Italian immigrant with needed skills could circumvent the problems of prejudice faced in his home country. Initially, Gatti was right, and he was widely accepted into elite circles as a performer and an expert on blind issues. The elite were ready to support this particular cause after many years of concerted campaigns.

Acceptance that there was a blind issue to be solved in Argentina did not resolve the problems of the nineteenth century that obstructed the creation of a national institute in 1884, 1897, 1900, or 1903. In 1908 the individuals with expertise, training, and experience in blind education continued to be blind. The teachers in the classrooms at the Asilo de Huérfanos and Casa de Huérfanos were both former students, and a large portion of the instructors at the Instituto para Ciegos de Ambos Sexos "Francisco Gatti" were also former students. Francisco Gatti served as the only director of a blind institute. Blind students, alumni, and observers had many reasons to believe that the propaganda generated about the revolutionary power of education for the blind was accurate and that new and expanded schooling opportunities meant acceptance of their skills and

knowledge on an equal level with sighted counterparts. Francisco Gatti provided a persuasive example to students and alumni of the potential authority that could be wielded by an educated blind man. They failed to understand the contingent nature of Gatti's and their own acceptance into leadership roles by the political and professional elite who helped sustain the few schools in existence prior to 1908.

Despite the outward appearance of acceptance of blind instructors, Argentine politicians and the professionals who advised them did not want to develop blind professionals within institutions for the blind. Instead they took cues from European and American institutions that continued to argue that the blind were naturally and permanently inferior to the sighted because of the relationship of between the senses and intellectual development. This argument developed and supported by Samuel Howe at the Perkins Institute during the mid-nineteenth century helped justify the lack of blind administrators at institutes for the blind and significantly prejudiced the hiring of blind staff. The Argentine national institute was suppose to serve as a mirror back to these types of institutions in order that the nations in which they were established could be seen as part of the push for progress and modernity. Therefore, in passing law 5786 politicians were willing to accept anyone other than a blind individual as the head of the new national institute. To do otherwise would contradict the given wisdom of the age and relegate Argentina's institution to an untenable position.

The wealthy public interested in the blind, but outside of the political and professional circles writing and advising on legislation did little to support Gatti and others following their demotions from positions of authority. Gatti also misread this population's admiration of his talents and knowledge. Where he believed he received

unqualified acceptance from women at the SBC for his work with the blind, they saw a multitude of things. For some, Gatti's musical performances and lectures were simple voyeuristic entertainment that allowed them to combine a common leisure activity with the extraordinary sight of a blind man performing. Once their curiosity was satisfied their interest waned. Others took a genuine interest in the blind, but like their political and professional counterparts accepted Gatti only in the absence of other options. When presented with someone sighted as a director of the new institute they did not question the wisdom of this choice. Finally, Gatti himself alienated some by insisting on his own expertise to the exclusion of all others. Prior to his creation of the ICAS, important and influential Argentines attempted to further the progress of social services for the blind in the country. Though their success was questionable, Gatti's refusal to recognize those attempts in all of his communications with the public and his insistence that he alone be recognized, as the founder of blind services in Argentina surely was disconcerting to those powerful supporters of the issue such as the Sociedad de Beneficencia.

By 1913, the misunderstandings between the educated blind leadership in Buenos Aires and the sighted politicians, professionals, and reformers who took an interest in blind issues became clear. Gatti was demoted, the school at the SBC closed, and several blind professors were fired and replaced with sighted staff. It became increasingly clear that moving forward politicians intended to favor sighted professionals in positions of authority and desired the gradual removal of blind educators from most positions of influence. However, over three decades of blind authority in institutions for the blind was not overturned so easily. Beginning in 1916, students within the newly created INC, alumni living in Buenos Aires, and a handful of educated blind immigrants pushed back

against the reorganization of authority and developed an entirely new system outside of the now state controlled Instituto Nacional para Ciegos.

Chapter Four

"Muchachos I Smell a Rat:" Students on Strike at the INC

Introduction

Between 1880 and 1915, the primary advocates for blind education and social services were sighted liberal reformers with links to the medical and educational professions. With the notable exception of Francisco Gatti, these individuals were Argentines who maintained comfortable working relationships with oligarchic rule. Their concern about the blind was driven by positivistic humanitarian principles and a desire to help establish Argentina as an equal to modernized countries in Europe and the United States. They grouped the blind together with a host of specific populations in need of scientific educational intervention to fit into the new modern landscape. The projects for the blind constructed by these liberals were ultimately paternalistic, as they believed sighted bodies were superior to blind ones. Francisco Gatti's role in the development of blind education disrupted liberal discourses about the weakness of blind persons versus sighted. His position at the ICAS was an uncomfortable challenge to the positivistic principles espoused by sighted advocates for blind education prior to 1915. His demotion and subordination to his female protégé conformed more closely to liberal constructions of authority in Argentina, but their control over blind social services would not last.

By 1915, at least two decades worth of students trained by Francisco Gatti and his colleagues lived in or near the capital city. This small group was joined by a growing number of young blind immigrants who arrived in the country in the hope of establishing a better future. This community became a knot of blind leadership that began to carve a

place for their agenda with the founding of the short-lived Asociación Luis Braille in 1915. This community of blind leaders quickly made it clear that they had a very different political and social perspective on social services for the blind. Between 1915 and 1930, blind leaders articulated a philosophy regarding services for the blind that resonated with the increasingly powerful discourses produced by organizations appealing to working class interests. Rather than separating the problems of the blind from society, blind leaders used the language of equality and justice to define the problems of blindness as part of the fundamental issues facing the working class. Equal access to labor and education became the core issue around which early attempts to organize the blind revolved.

By the time that Asociación Louis Braille was founded, Argentine politics were undergoing radical shifts. In 1912, the ruling oligarchic elite responded to increasing pressure from working class organizations by passing the Saenz Peña law. The law ushered in extensive electoral reforms that made it more difficult for the oligarchy to manipulate elections in its favor. The effects of the reform became most evident in 1916 with the election of Hipólito Yrigoyen. The election of Yrigoyen represented the will of the newly empowered masses. Yrigoyen's ascendancy to the presidency, however, did not quell the demands made by the sectors of society that felt disenfranchised by the oligarchic rule that preceded him. Like the years leading up to the election of 1916, the lower and middle classes continued to demand reform through public action. Students, rail workers, dock men, printers and others made themselves heard in their schools, factories, and in the streets. These groups adopted militant tools like the strike, the boycott, the walkout and the work slow down to force actions in their favor. Blind

leadership considered themselves part of this disenfranchised community. They utilized connections within it, especially to socialist organizations, to find meeting space, printing resources, and financial support. When they felt that action was called for, they drew on the tools used by those organizations to demand attention.

Working class responses to campaigns for blind social services were initially conflictive. Some neighborhood associations welcomed blind leaders into their spaces and helped them publish their materials, but the number of blind leaders was relatively small and their voices were marginalized in comparison to sighted liberal reformers. Blindness was in the public eye during this period not because of blind leadership, but because of projects like José Pérez Mendoza's proposal for the IAC. Mendoza's project was proposed by conservative deputy and noted medical doctor Louis Agote. Agote and Mendoza appealed to congressional deputies' humanitarianism while simultaneously warning that without such legislation Argentina would fall behind its neighbors. The legislation was, therefore, sold to deputies as something they must do lest Argentina's international image suffered. Socialists heavily critiqued Agote and his associates' legislative priorities, and the new institute for the blind was no different. One socialist who wrote for *La Vanguardia* rejected the measure stating, "The majority of congress is very interested in the fate of the blind, more than the fate of the sighted. As, for example, this majority does not want to address deputy Justo's project to teach reading and writing to the seven hundred thousand children in the country who do not have schools or teachers."¹ Blind leadership only began to win favor in the socialist press once they positioned themselves in opposition to the institution created by Mendoza and Agote.

¹ "La ceguera del Diputado Agote," *La Vanguardia*, September 27, 1913, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed, 11/20/2012), 1. *A la mayoría del congreso interesa mucho la suerte de los ciegos, más*

In 1916, after the failure of the Asociación Louis Braille, blind leaders regrouped and formed *La Fraternal* (The Fraternity), a political organization for the blind by the blind. *La Fraternal* rejected the terminology of liberal humanitarianism about the blind and blindness and began to incorporate the terminology of justice and rights utilized by workers groups. They ignored arguments about whether the INC and IAC should or should not exist, and instead focused on the fact that the INC and IAC existed in law. They argued that because these institutions existed in law, the national government had a duty to fulfill their legislative promise for justice to be served. By utilizing this argument, blind leadership made their cause about government promises and justice in a way that dovetailed with demands by socialist leadership. The problem, they argued, was not about the blind specifically, but about the government complying with their own laws. It was about fair treatment for everyone, not prioritizing one group over another. The strategy was successful at garnering more and more positive press from socialist sectors and securing socialist support for the burgeoning blind political movement. By 1916, the movement was strong enough to become a vocal entity directing interpretations of events when students at the INC embarked on political action of their own.

The paternalistic attitude of sighted advocates toward the blind meant that they did not consider the possibility of opposition to their projects from the blind community. Propaganda created by the INC and the IAC in association with the *La Prensa* and *La Nación*, conveyed an image of the blind that was antithetical to rebellion, radical ideology, and political action. The blind were meek, humbly grateful for their education, and quietly cultured. This image was deeply gendered as sighted advocates asserted that

que la suerte de los videntes. Así, por ejemplo, esta mayoría no quiere tratar el proyecto del diputado Justo para enseñar a leer y escribir a los setecientos mil niños del país que no tienen escuelas ni maestros.

it was more difficult for blind males to accept their inferiority than it was for blind females. Blind women inherited the supposedly natural meekness of their sex, while blind men had to achieve this through education. The image of the grateful blind student was more than a simple image, however. As stated in the introduction, gratitude was a fundamental part of how administrators of institutions understood the emotional, moral and spiritual health of those in their institutions. Blind leaders represented the alumni of the existing schools for the blind. They were the population that should have been physical representations of gratitude as warranted by the education that they received. After all, news outlets assured their reading public that education for the blind eradicated a problematic sector of society by elevating their status through knowledge. The idea of the demure blind citizen was an unrealistic caricature created by sighted advocates, but it was a caricature that they believed should represent reality.

Imagining the Blind: The Press and the Image of Blindness

From 1908 onward press attention to blind issues increased dramatically as a result of legislative drives toward greater institutionalization. The legislative campaign to establish the IAC in 1913, in particular, generated significant press after the newspapers *La Nación* and *La Prensa*, decided to promote the legislation. Institutional authorities, specifically Eva San Roman, saw law project 9339 as a direct threat to their authority, and she turned to the press to combat the legislation. As stated in chapter two, San Roman and Mendoza utilized the press to articulate their case. Both institutional directors, however, drew on the same imagery to make their public arguments. They used

static sentimentalist portrayals of blind individuals as tragic victims of fate coupled with heroic descriptions of the power of liberal education to save the blind from misery.

Nineteenth century characterizations of the blind focused on the impoverished blind adult left to fend for themselves in the squalor of the streets and isolated from society. The press campaigns of the twentieth century sought to prod readers to connect this helpless adult figure to the lost potential of the youthful and intelligent blind. Many articles began by listing the elements of life (especially youthful life) that the blind could not participate in. In some article the focus was on the natural beauties the blind would never see. "For the unfortunate who will never see the face of mother, who is his comfort, nor know of brightness, nor of panoramas, nor of lights, nor of reflections, nor of stars. For he who lives in perpetual night in shadows without beginning or end. Those who do not even have tears with which to cry for their sorrows--their very infinite sorrows."² In others they discussed the games they would not play in and how this resulted in isolation from other children. Authors of these articles published about the blind asserted that blind children lead lives antithetical to childhood. As a result, blind children had a propensity to melancholy, were introverted, and unnaturally quiet. The only way to save these children from a tendency to turn inward and to help them integrate into society was to provide them with a comprehensive education. Only then could they realize their full potential and lead happy lives.

News articles between 1908 and 1910 positioned liberal education as a miraculous revelation for the blind. First and foremost it (theoretically) provided a trade,

² Alberto Meyer Arana, "Por el niño ciego," *La Nación*, November 13, 1910, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/5/2013). *¿Por el infortunado que nunca vio el rostro de la madre, cuyo e su regazo, ni sabe de claridades, ni de panoramas, ni de luces, ni de reflejos, ni de soles, ni de estrellas. Por el que vive noche perpetua en tenebrosidades sin principio o fin. Por quien ni siquiera tiene lagrimas para llorar sus tristezas--sus muchas infinitas tristezas...!*

the most important form of social integration in the capitalist system. With a vocation they could contribute financially to their own needs and lift a portion of the burden from their family and friends. However, articles on the blind in Argentina focused on the way that education altered the character of the blind more than they focused on their economic prospects. Knowledge, especially the ability to read, transformed the sad disposition of the blind youth into one of joy. It gave the blind the ability to create and appreciate beauty by teaching music and writing, but even reading was still circumscribed by an individual's blindness. In discussing blind reading habits one article stated,

What are the preferred types of reading for the blind? For the men it is not romance novels as they know little of the beauty of women nor of the pretensions that consume the heart of women. Instead they read history and sociology. It is important to note that the children of the proletariat have the same preferences as for those of the elevated classes. There is nothing strange in this it is because they have received the same instruction. Women, naturally, have a tendency toward romance novels. Even though their sensibilities are somewhat more indecisive than those who can see, they feel their inferiority less than blind men. Across the board however music books are the most sought after.³

Articles between 1908 and 1913 promised that education would erase the dirty, impoverished and desperate blind beggar and replace him with a quiet, cultured, and satisfied blind man who could make his own way in the world. The article introduced a new blind archetype that was a carefully manicured, sober and contented young man who was an accomplished musician with a cultured demeanor associated with being well read.

³ "Un ciego doctor en letras," *La Prensa*, September 6, 1908, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/5/2012). *¿Cuáles son las lecturas preferidas por los ciegos? Para lo hombres no son las novelas de amor. ¿Qué harían con ellas, no teniendo una noción exacta de la belleza femenina ni tampoco la pretensión de conocer un corazón de mujer? Son principalmente obras de historia y de sociología. Y es digno de notar que los ciegos hijos de proletarios tienen en este respecto la misma afición que las que pertenecen a las clases elevadas de la sociedad. No hay nada extraño de eso. Han recibido absolutamente la misma instrucción. Las mujeres tienen naturalmente más tendencia hacia las novelas de amor. Aunque su sensibilidad es algo mas indecisa que la de las que ven, sienten menos que los hombres ciegos su inferioridad.*

In 1913, when José Pérez Mendoza began to promote his ideas he faced a problem. Mendoza's own propaganda suggested that education for the blind would eradicate the problems of blindness altogether. If education converted blind children into independent blind adults, in a few years and with expanded education for children throughout the country there would be no need for many of the programs for adults delineated by Mendoza's law project 9339. Eva San Roman used this logic against Mendoza in the press, arguing that the INC was the only institution that was really necessary to aid the blind. In response Mendoza had to dissuade the public from what he believed was an overly optimistic view of the potential of education for the blind. He therefore published a series of articles in which he attempted to convince the public of the life long dependency wrought by blindness. In one article he stated, "One shouldn't forget that the blind can not, in equal conditions and in general work, compete with the sighted, which it is why that the it is absolutely necessary to help this man."⁴ To make his legislation relevant Mendoza needed the public to accept the image of the educated and cultured blind man and also to accept that that same individual was perpetually dependent on others to maintain that character.

Mendoza's assertion about the life long dependency of the blind unintentionally supported critiques of schools for the disabled who argued that they educated populations that would never be able to use those educations. Deputies sympathetic to workers and those concerned about illiteracy in the country were frustrated about expenditures for specialized institutions when literacy rates among able-bodied working class children

⁴ José Pérez Mendoza, "Lo que puede hacer los ciegos en la Argentina," *La Prensa*, June 5, 1913, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 2/15/15). *No has que olvidar que el ciego no puede, en igualdad de condiciones y en la generalidad de los trabajos, competir con los videntes por lo que es de absoluta necesidad que se ayude.*

remained low. In an article published in *La Prensa*, one author argued that, "The deaf, the blind, the imbeciles and those simply abnormal will always form the heavy and painful impediment of human society. They should receive all the sympathy possible, but without sacrificing the life force and fruits that cultivate collective progress."⁵ Another author sarcastically suggested that poor families enroll their able bodied children in these specialized institutions in order to secure them the best education possible.⁶ The dramatic growth of specialized institutions for specific populations in the first decade of the twentieth century was disconcerting for advocates of social programs for the working classes. Rather than see these institutions as necessary projects to aid and contain the least desirable elements in society, political powers sympathetic to workers understood institutions for the disabled as a poor prioritization of state resources. To circumvent these critiques advocates for social services for the blind would have to show that these services were distinct from and more useful than services for other disabled groups.

Mendoza's propaganda following the passage of the legislation creating the IAC shifted the discussion about blind education away from its revolutionizing ability to make the blind independent citizens. Blind Education would improve the lives of the blind, but the blind would still require ongoing services provided by sighted experts. In order to push forward the full vision he had for the IAC he argued that blindness created a permanent dependence on charity that was only alleviated by education. Education, therefore, did not create economic opportunities for the blind but served as a kind of

⁵ "Fuerzas que se pierdan," *La Prensa*, March 4, 1914, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/25/2012). *Los sordomudos, los ciegos, los imbéciles los idiotas o los simplemente anormales, formarán siempre la pesada y dolorosa impedimenta de la sociedad humana. Hay que ampararlos con todas las solicitudes de la simpatía y de la abnegación, pero sin sacrificar las fuerzas vivas y fecundas que labran el progreso colectivo.* [sic]

⁶ "El instituto de ciegos," *La Prensa*, October 12, 1914, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/5/2012).

therapy that improved blind moral, spiritual and emotional conditions. Education for the blind, unlike that for the sighted, was charity or public assistance. Mendoza made his rhetorical analysis of blind education a reality by prompting Congress to move all institutions for the blind, including the INC, to the control of the *Ministerio de Asistencia Pública* (Ministry of Public Assistance) rather than *Ministerio de Instrucción Pública*.⁷ As an entity of Public Assistance Mendoza felt that this better represented his overall vision for the IAC. He also felt that as a unit under Public Assistance it would be easier to initiate action toward the construction of the IAC. At this stage he only needed a piece of land and approval of the construction plans he had already commissioned.

It was not until 1915 that government authorities finally provided Mendoza with the land he needed to begin actual construction of the IAC. They gave him a tract of land located in the neighborhood of Villa del Parque near Cementerio de la Chacarita. The property was to be divided between the Instituto Argentino para Ciegos and the Sociedad de Beneficencia's new Casa de Huérfanas.⁸ During their investigation of the land grant the SBC came to the conclusion that the IAC had been granted the more desirable section of the fifteen hectares.⁹ As a result the SBC began to agitate within government circles to either be given the IAC's tract of land or a better piece of land elsewhere in the city. They contacted contractors to testify as to the utility of their tract, wrote copious letters to city

⁷ "Actas del Congreso," *La Vanguardia*, August 26, 2015, World News Archive Database (accessed 2/21/2015).

⁸ Luis Jopelberg and S. Guigliasiz, "Ministerio de Obras Publicas y Dirección General de Arquitectura: terrenos a adjudicarse a la Institución Argentina de Ciegos y Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital" (Buenos Aires: 1916) AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Casa de Huérfanas "Crecencia Boado de Garrigos, 1833-1919, legajo 39, 453. The property was located between Calle Chorroarin, Avenida Warne, Avenida de los Constituyentes (under construction at the time), and what are today train tracks.

⁹ Ibid. The IAC section was located on higher ground, with four sides and situated between two developed streets. The SBC section was slightly smaller, wedge shaped, and it was situated on two undeveloped streets.

and federal officials to complain about the state of the land, and in general took every measure within their means to delay the conclusion of negotiations regarding the land in the hope that they would eventually acquire the piece they desired. In the end they were successful. The SBC was able to delay proceedings long enough for outside events to shake the foundations of the IAC and prevent the construction of a single building.

While Mendoza and his colleagues grappled with the persistent obstacles blocking the full implementation of Law 9339, blind leaders outside of the institutional structure watched carefully. Blind leaders initially hoped that the IAC would create new avenues for the blind to acquire the skills and resources necessary to find employment. As would soon become clear, blind leaders saw the proposed institutions as a way to give the blind of all ages and situations the tools to succeed on their own. Sighted reformers allied to the IAC saw the programs as a necessary form of social welfare for a permanently dependent population. While the INC and the IAC remained the only institutions for the blind, the contradiction between these viewpoints generated distrust between blind and sighted advocates. The distrust deepened as the sighted reformers in power at the IAC consistently failed to implement the projects articulated in the law. Without land or governmental backing, leadership at the IAC attempted to establish their importance through other channels, namely public health campaigns to help prevent blindness.¹⁰ To blind leadership the IAC appeared more incompetent with each passing month. Mendoza's decision to prioritize the physical construction of IAC facilities over all other proposals alienated any support he may initially have had for the IAC among blind leadership.

¹⁰ Ibid. This included opening a small free eye clinic. They also lobbied for a bill that allowed Braille materials to be sent domestically and internationally for free.

Daily Life at the INC: A Mixed Model of Service

While Mendoza negotiated with the SBC, the services that were available for the blind operated under the auspices of the Instituto Nacional para Ciegos, now controlled by the IAC. The IAC directive committee attempted to compensate for the lack of progress in construction of their planned facilities by expanding practices started by Eva San Roman to incorporate more young adults into the INC structure. In her battles with Mendoza prior to her arrest, Eva San Roman attempted to prove that the INC could provide services to adults without necessitating the construction of an entirely new institution. To do this San Roman accepted students in their late teens and twenties to live at the school in order to work and train in the existing workshop and music facilities. She solicited organizations like the SBC and the Asilo de Mendigos to find young adult blind to attend the INC, ostensibly to gain vocational training.¹¹ In this way, the INC argued that they were already providing many of the services suggested by the IAC, namely the professionalization of adults. In reality the INC did not have an adult education curriculum. In reality the workshops at the INC were very underdeveloped with few actual instructors. Older students were left to their own devices to use the workshops as they saw fit.

When the IAC took over operation at the INC they did little to alter or improve the "adult education" put in place by Eva San Roman. As students passed out of the elementary education system they were absorbed into a poorly staffed and poorly organized workshop system. They continued to live and train at the INC because they

¹¹ Letter from Figueroa Alcortato to Presidenta de la Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital, August 10, 1910, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Casa de Huérfanas "Crecencia Boado de Garrigos, 1833-1919, legajo 39.

still had few marketable skills beyond their elementary education. The only real opportunities existed for those with musical talents. The INC provided an excellent musical training program, largely provided by blind teachers like Francisco Gatti. Administrators at the school were aware that though musical occupations were often the most lucrative and secure for their students, only those with substantial musical talent were likely to secure such positions.¹² Despite IAC's acknowledgement that many were not suited for musical careers the organization did little to expand vocational training to other arenas. Instead they provided mini-courses or simply advertised student services as massage therapists or telephone operators without providing the training necessary for the students to actually excel in these areas. As a result, older students grew frustrated with the directive committee and began to critique operations at the INC.

Between 1913 and 1918, the INC began to operate as a hybrid institution ineffectively claiming to fulfill a diverse array of needs for a diverse student population. As the needs of the student body grew more diverse the staff grew less experienced. Between 1908 and 1916, the staff at the INC gradually shifted from predominately blind teachers to mostly sighted teachers in order to conform more closely to the institutions in the US and Europe admired by Mendoza. There was not formal training for blind educators meaning that none of the sighted teachers had training in the special education of the blind. More importantly, however, as the INC no longer fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministerio de Instrucción Publica many of the sighted instructors were not even licensed teachers. Blind teachers with experience both as students and educators like

¹² José Pérez Mendoza, "Lo que puede hacer los ciegos en la Argentina."

Angela Arce and Francisco Gatti retained little authority after multiple rounds of administrative re-organizations.¹³

As the student population grew more diverse in age and need, some sighted teachers added further complexity to the poorly defined purpose of the INC by using it as the base for psychological research on the blind.¹⁴ During 1915, a group of female professors, including the future director of the institute Maria Luisa Gallian, began a psychological study of three young boys living at the INC titled, *Psico-Fisiología del Ciego: Contribución a su estudio, ensayo clínico experimental*.¹⁵ In describing their subjects two of the women recounted how they were caught observing them and were accused of spying. One of these subjects was Domitilo Rodriguez who the professor described as a calm, diligent, and even-tempered young man of fifteen years of age. During the study one of the professors attempted to observe Domitilo in secret and was discovered. Domitilo demanded to know why she was "spying" on him. The professor concluded from his reaction that despite his apparent inner calm Domitilo must have a hidden nervous nature that made him prone to paranoia if provoked.¹⁶ In another incident one of the professors was observing 11-year-old Argentine student, Juan Russo. Juancito,

¹³ Angel Arce was a former student of Francisco Gatti from his days at the classroom in the Asilo de Huérfanos. When Gatti left to form the ICAS, Angela took over the girls' section at the Asilo. After the dismissal of San Roman the institution changed directors three times between 1914 and 1916.

¹⁴ Using institutionalized individuals for the purpose of study was not unusual during this time period in either Argentina or the rest of the world.

¹⁵ María Luisa Galian, María C. Burrier, María Ernestina Degastaldi, and Emilia Martos, *Psico-fisiología del ciego: Ensayo clínico experimental* (Buenos Aires: Compañía Sud-Americana de Billetes del Banco, 1916). The study was conducted under the direction of Horatio Piñero, one of Argentina's most prominent experimental psychologists. The women combined student records, staff interviews, and "secret" observations of the students to construct their thesis and analysis.

¹⁶ Ibid., 5.

as she called him, was playing with a group of his friends and the professor tried to enter the room undetected.

At one point it occurred to me the desire to follow him at the table, games, intimate conversations, and noises, without advertising my presence, absolutely without achieving it, after taking miniscule precautions and maintaining a distance I entered the *comedor* or room where he was and at that point he ceased his work and exclaimed: "*Muchachos*, I smell a rat! It seems to me the smell of teachers."¹⁷

Juancito and his friends then attempted to find the exact location of the teacher in the room, the teacher slipped away before they found her.

Both of these cases reveal a pronounced ignorance on the part of the sighted teachers about the capabilities of their students. In the case of Juan Russo the professor was caught because she believed that silence was an effective cloaking measure to disguise her presence. She failed to account for the boys' sense of smell. Staff ignorance about the student's awareness of their surroundings created an atmosphere in which the staff felt they could act in certain ways without attracting the attention of the students. The inexperience of the staff created additional chaos in an institution that was already poorly organized. Over the years staff ignorance led many students to report that teachers at the institute were having illicit affairs or engaging in secret and inappropriate relationships.¹⁸ The children's interpretations of conversations taking place between adult staff at the institute may have acquired some imaginative notes, but the staff at the institute believed that because of the children's lack of sight they could engage in private even secret conversation near the internees without being "seen." To the contrary,

¹⁷ Ibid., 8. *A tal punto que me ha ocurrido el querer seguirlo en la mesa, juegos, conversaciones íntimas y ruidosas, sin que advirtiera mi presencia, sin lograrlo en absoluto, pues tomando precauciones minuciosas y manteniéndome a distancia, me presentaba al comedor o habitación en que se encontraba y al punto cesando en su tarea, exclamaba: "¡Muchachos, olor sospechoso!" "me parece olor a maestras."*

¹⁸ Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública, *Memoria del ministerio de justicia e instrucción pública, 1917*, vol. IV (Buenos Aires Talleres Gráficos de la Penitenciaría Nacional, 1917), 272.

students were very keen observers of the affairs of the adults around them and came to perceive attempts to deceive as confrontations between themselves and the staff.

The INC students awareness of their surroundings is best highlighted by a game that they played in their spare time. The game was recounted in Gallian's psychological study as a side note about the blind and free play. In the game the children split into two sides. One group of children represented German forces and allies and the other British forces and allies. In the game they re-fought the battles and dramas of the World War I as they read about them in the papers.¹⁹ The students awareness of the global conflict and their passionate responses to it reveals the ways in which life inside the INC connected to the world outside of the institute. The students were not ignorant of political, social, or philosophical developments in their world. They formulated strong opinions about those developments and sought ways to act on those opinions. The staff at the INC witnessed these games and assessed them to be a product of a natural tendency toward rebellion on the part of the blind. The teachers wrote, "The warrior instinct does not easily disappear in the blind because of that latent feeling of rebellion, that I spoke of earlier."²⁰ They failed to grasp the extent to which the students were engaged in conceiving of the outside world and their place in it. Older students, in particular, studied their surroundings and sought advice, information, and guidance from older peers. They used their ample free time at the institute to make contacts and friends outside of it. The students were ready and open to begin conversations with individuals who would be willing to listen to them

¹⁹ Gallian, *Psico-fisiología del ciego*, 14. *El instinto belicoso no desaparece fácilmente en los ciegos y es porque esta en latencia el sentimiento de rebelión de que hablaba antes.*

²⁰ Ibid., 14.

and incorporate them into serious conversations about the place of the blind in the sighted world. They found just such a group of people in the society for the blind, La Fraternal.

La Fraternal

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, in 1915 a blind community began to coalesce in an organized fashion around a core group of leaders who wanted to pursue political and structural change for the blind. At the center of leadership was the Spanish immigrant Julián Baquero. Baquero arrived in Buenos Aires from Madrid in 1909 and at the age of 21 was already an accomplished organizer and writer on blind issues. He was well published in two different magazines for the blind in Madrid, *La literatura* (Literature) and *Mensajero de los ciegos* (Messenger of the Blind). He was also one of the founders of the *Biblioteca Circulante en el Centro Instructivo y Protector de Ciegos* (The Circulating Library in the Instructive and Protective Center for the Blind) of Madrid.²¹ His ideas about independence, labor, and freedom for the blind were well developed on his arrival and he almost immediately set about forming a political organization in Buenos Aires to promote those ideas. He began organizing in 1915 with the Asociación Luis Braille. When that project failed he joined forces with avid socialist Vicente Vercelli as well as his close friends Siegesmundo Taladriz and Vicenta Castro Cambón to form the La Sociedad para los Ciegos, La Fraternal.

La Fraternal promoted independent living for the blind and attempted to change the stereotyped image of blindness. They suggested that rather than tragic victims the

²¹ David López, "Julián Baquero: Su trayectoria tiflológica," Conferencia pronunciada en la Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, 27 October 1983, <http://www.bac.org.ar/baquero.html> (accessed 02/21/2015); Ángel Prignano, "Julián Baquero," *Ochenta años de relieve* (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Argentina, 2004), <http://www.bab.org.ar/baquero.html> (accessed 02/21/2015).

blind could, with minor interventions, control their own destinies. They rejected the participation of the sighted in their organization, and in doing so became the first disability organization of this kind in Buenos Aires and potentially in the southern hemisphere.²² Equality was an important touchstone for the organization and they incorporated the concept into their organizational structure on more than one level. Beyond their desire for equality between the blind and sighted, La Fraternal maintained equal representation of both men and women in their organization. It was important to Baquero, Verecelli, Taladriz, and Cambón that their cause extend beyond the confines of blindness to incorporate and support other prominent social movements including workers, students, and feminists. They most closely associated with the socialists and made the socialist meeting rooms in the neighborhood of Las Flores their meeting space. The group wanted more than social services and frequently advocated for broad social change that would incorporate all peoples into an equitable and just social system. Member opinions varied, but in the beginning most members favored evolutionary change from within to revolutionary change.

La Fraternal posed a significant problem for those who wished to contain the disabled in an apolitical discourse that allowed for the perpetuation of older social relationships, namely sighted reformers and charity organizers. The organization not only demanded that they have a say over social services for the blind, but that they do so without the guidance of sighted members of society. Their writings insinuated that members of the organization believed that they should hold a superior position to that of

²² An early disability association known as La Asociación de Sordomudos was formed in 1912, however, this association did not refuse membership to the hearing and functioned largely as a mutual aid society rather than as a political advocacy organization. Additional research is necessary to ascertain the historical legacy of political movements for the disabled by the disabled in other Latin American countries.

their sighted counterparts in defining the direction of blind services. They, much like counterparts in the organized workers movement, dismissed the paternalism that guided the existence of the INC and demanded complete reorganization of society. Propaganda about the blind generated by liberal sighted reformers suggested that the blind, unlike the able-bodied working classes, were in little danger of falling prey to radical ideologies and that blind education ensured that the blind would be grateful and compliant citizens. This must have seemed reassuring to the medical doctors, public health officials and education specialists who were already beleaguered by working class organizations that loudly and vociferously entered into debates regarding the provision of services. Unfortunately for those professionals, La Fraternal refused to be docile.

La Fraternal officially formed in 1916 but did not publically announced its presence until late fall of 1917. In their initial introduction to porteño society the organization focused on immediate goals over their long-term agenda. The society detailed their position stating:

This society composed and run by the blind of both sexes to the exclusion of all foreign elements met in monthly assembly and considered whether the Argentine Institute for the Blind was far from fulfilling its educative and humanitarian functions conferred on it by the national executive and an entire series of administrative-educational irregularities, it has resolved: 1st to publically demonstrate the profound disgrace produced by their unspeakable conduct. 2nd To send a petition to the public powers which asks for the reincorporation of the National Institute for the Blind into the Ministry of Justice and Public Instruction 3rd To authorize to the executive committee the adoption of all measures that protect the interests of blind children, seriously prejudiced.²³

²³ La Fraternal, "Instrucción Pública: 'La Fraternal,'" *La Vanguardia*, June 20, 1917, Work Newspaper Archive Database (accessed, 10/18/2012). *Esta sociedad compuesta y dirigida por ciegos de ambos sexos, con exclusión de todo elemento extraño, reunida en asamblea mensual, y considerando que la institución argentina de ciegos está lejos de llenar las funciones educadoras y humanitarias que le confiara el ejecutivo nacional, y toda una serie de irregularidades administrativo educacionales, resolvió: 1°. Demostrar públicamente el profundo desagrado que lo produce conducta tan incalificable. 2°. Elevar una petición a los poderes públicos en la cual se pide la reincorporación del instituto nacional de ciegos al ministerio de justicia e instrucción pública, y 3°. Facultar a la junta ejecutiva para adoptar todas aquellas*

At the heart of La Fraternal's concerns was the mismanagement of the two most prominent entities for the blind in the country the INC and the IAC. They paid special attention to operations at the INC as it serviced an actual population of blind youths, whereas the IAC only existed as a directive committee. La Fraternal's concerns with the INC increased as they came into contact with older students attending the school. As it became clear that administrators had made few changes to the INC and employed a growing number of under trained staff, frustrations mounted began to mount. Practices within the school deepened the divide between sighted staff and students, and drove older students to confide more readily in La Fraternal. In late fall of 1917, La Fraternal began to print manifestos in the socialist paper *La Vanguardia*, denouncing administrators of the INC and calling for reform. By mid-winter, tensions were rising as students began to push their boundaries and test authority figures, eliciting what they considered inappropriately physical responses.

The 1917 Student Strike

As problems at the INC increased students and La Fraternal began to consider more active methods for capturing administrators attention. During the last week of August in 1917, the student body at the Instituto Nacional para Ciegos sent a group of several of the older boys to articulate a list of demands to the directora of the facility. According to the directora, the students indicated that they wanted improved food that did not include quince jelly or oranges. They demanded that each student be provided two

medidas que tiendan a salvaguardar los intereses de los niños ciegos, seriamente perjudicados. La Fraternal's use of "foreign" here is to imply all non-blind individuals. Nearly half the leaders of La Fraternal were immigrants without Argentine citizenship at this time.

dry blankets and bed sheets.²⁴ Finally, they wanted the institution of what they called the "Republica de Niños," which would replace half of the directive body of the IAC with blind students elected from the student population.²⁵ In a separate article printed by the socialist paper *La Vanguardia*, the students also demanded that the directora be replaced with someone with an accredited license to teach in Argentina.²⁶ The students were considered rebellious troublemakers and their demands were ignored. None of the administrators anticipated the extent of displeasure in the overall population. They were therefore surprised when on September 1, 1917 at seven o' clock in the morning a general student strike began at the INC.

The morning of the strike the bulk of the student body arose at the usual hour of five thirty in the morning and prepared for the day as normal. Between five thirty and seven o'clock word traveled through the student population that at breakfast the students were to cease cooperating with staff and refuse both breakfast and to attend classes. Reports indicated that all students attending the INC complied with the strike, led by older male and female students at the institute. The students' next action was to communicate to the directora of the institute and with the Ministry of Public Instruction to reiterate their demands from the previous week and request intervention from the Ministry to negotiate a settlement.²⁷ The MIP sent two investigators named Remolar and

²⁴ Instituto Nacional de Ciegos, *Reglamento para el Instituto Nacional de Ciegos* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos de La Penitenciaría Nacional, 1911), 37. Students were required to bring these items with them when they enrolled.

²⁵ "En el Instituto Nacional de Ciegos: Evasión de aislados algunos antecedentes," *La Prensa*, September 3, 1917, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/17/2012).

²⁶ "En el Instituto Nacional de Ciegos: Huelga de alumnos," *La Vanguardia*, September 2, 1917, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 8/28/2014).

²⁷ "El sumario en el Instituto de Ciegos," *La Prensa*, September 10, 1917, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/17/2012). This process was common practice among students across the city of

Guaglianope to the institute to inquire into the developing situation. On arrival the investigators spoke with students, interviewed administrators, and toured the facility. They claimed the facilities were in excellent condition, but recommended a more complete investigation of the institute given what they felt was the unusual nature of this student population.²⁸ That day and the following, several more individuals arrived at the INC to conduct examinations. All reported that there were few visible problems at the facility.

As ministry officials investigated accusations made by students, administrators at the INC implemented disciplinary measures aimed at the striking students. Students under the age of twelve were pardoned for their participation because administrators assumed that their older peers influenced them. Administrators decided that the bulk of the older students should be sent home to parents or relatives for a period as punishment for their rebellion. For most students exile was intended to extend a few days. For the older males who were labeled leaders of the incident, their removal would be permanent. For many of the students, some of whom were in their twenties, returning to their families meant being sent away from Buenos Aires to live in the provinces. This ostracized them from their community and nearly all the resources for the blind that existed in the country. This included access to reading material, tools for blind trades, and any form of job market that might exist for those trades. For many, this was a form of isolation that was unacceptable and unjust given their age and competency. Additionally,

Buenos Aires when they were dissatisfied with school operations. One journalist points out that the same week as the strike at the INC, students at colegio Carlos Pellegrini also struck and that their first course of action was to contact the Ministry and request that an investigator be sent to mediate their case. In this case the students' choice was particularly important given the debate about which ministry should have jurisdiction over the school, public assistance or public instruction.

²⁸ Newspaper articles from 1914, 1915, and 1916 indicated that the INC was a dilapidated building in need of repair and extremely drafty.

some students claimed that directly following the strike caregivers, professors, and administrators became physical with students and resorted to pushing and hitting them in the corridors. Some students claimed to fear for their younger counterparts who remained at the INC. Thus, when the school attempted to enforce their chosen punishments the students again reacted, and this time with more direct action.²⁹

Administrators waited two days to inform the students about the planned disciplinary measures. The students reacted to the punishment by going out onto one of the balconies of the INC to chant and shout insults at both administrators and the MIP investigators who were aiding administrators to regain control of the school. According to staff at the facility when they attempted to intervene and encourage the students to return inside the students became violent. They shoved staff members back through the door, closing and securing the door behind them. According to students, when staff members entered the balcony they closed the door behind them because the staff began to treat the students violently. When it became clear to the older students that administration did not intend to concede, the students decided to desert the INC altogether. They gathered at the front door, where again there was a physical struggle. Students claimed that in an attempt to intimidate them student Angel Cenetio was pushed through a glass door, shattering it and leaving him with lacerations. The staff claimed that the student was in such a hurry to get out and was so violent that he ran through the door. In the end, the students got through to the door and administrators watched as at least a third of the

²⁹ Student accusations appear in, "En el Instituto Nacional de Ciegos: asilados abandonan el local" *La Vanguardia*, September 9, 1917, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/17/2012); and Bartolomé Ayrolo, "Informe to S. E. el Señor Ministro de Justicia e Instrucción Pública, doctor José S. Salinas," December 20, 1917, *Memoria del Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública, Departamento de Justicia*, vol. 4 (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos de la Penitenciaría Nacional, 1918), 271.

entire student population of the INC walked off the property and into the surrounding neighborhood of Las Flores.³⁰

During the physical encounter at the door, one of the staff at the INC notified the local police precinct that they required assistance regaining order at the institution. Though they did not arrive in time to prevent the students from leaving they did pursue and eventually detain the students on Rivadavia Avenue, taking them to be processed at the twenty-third commissary.³¹ Of the students arrested the bulk were sent to their families where they remained for the duration of the investigation into the incidents of late August and early September. A few however, refused to go either back to the INC or to their families and chose to remain incarcerated in the precinct until a more equitable solution was found.³²

Even more than the general student strike on September 1, the events of the third generated a flurry of press in Buenos Aires. Initial reactions from the press assumed that conditions at the INC were bad in order to have stirred a group of blind children to such drastic actions.³³ *La Vanguardia*, the organ of La Fraternal, reported vigorously in favor of the students. They highlighted the problems that a forced return to families in the provinces meant for students. They also accepted student accounts of operations inside the institution. They pointed out that the institution received a federal subsidy bigger than even larger schools and yet the students were fed inferior diets with little variety. They were also required to provide their own clothes and bedding even though many came

³⁰ "En el Instituto Nacional de Ciegos: asilados abandonan el local."

³¹ Ibid.

³² In the absence of the complete file on the strike it is unknown what became of these individuals, for the moment.

³³ "En el Instituto Nacional de Ciegos: Evasión de aislados algunos antecedentes."

from extremely impoverished families and stayed at the institution for between ten and twenty years. This left some students, particularly those who were older, with little by way of protection against the cold at night. Finally, the students accused sighted staff at the school of extensive abuses ranging from physical threats to elicit love affairs between staff members.³⁴

La Vanguardia's stance in favor of the rebels contrasted with the majority of papers, which eventually began to report, tentatively, in favor of administrators. *La Prensa*, which also covered the strike in detail, only interviewed the staff and MIP investigators for their reports. They detailed the ways in which the older male students became violent, problems within the institute, and were careful to point out that none of the officials who visited the facilities during the investigation found any cause for concern regarding the students' living conditions.³⁵ One journalist for *La Prensa* insinuated that the students' demands were petty by contrasting their complaints about food and clothing with the fact that the school was free.³⁶ Despite their clear sympathy for the administration, *La Prensa* never fully backed it in the same manner that *La Vanguardia* defended student actions. In every article, despite attempts to explain student behavior as the influence of a few deviant older males, journalists covering the story for *La Prensa* remained convinced that there must be at least something behind student allegations to have turned a docile population of youths into violent rebels. They insisted

³⁴ See footnote 29.

³⁵ "En el Instituto Nacional de Ciegos: Nueva Investigación," *La Vanguardia*, September 10, 1917, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/17/2012).

³⁶ "El sumario en el Instituto de Ciegos."

that an investigation into the incidents by the MIP was necessary to ascertain the full truth behind the events of early September.³⁷

Images of Blindness v. Student Actions

The problem that La Prensa and sighted activists for the blind confronted when discussing the strike was the gulf between the students' actions at the INC and the image of the blind that they promoted. The press campaigns since 1908 had encouraged an image of the blind as the most destitute, least independent, and most helpless of disabilities. Instead the student actions portrayed an independent, rebellious, and highly mobile student population. They not only did not need their teachers to function in society but they were capable of directly and physically opposing the authorities on which they were suppose to depend. In contrast to the quiet melancholic blind student quietly playing the piano, these students were loud. They shouted from balconies, and their shouts were angry, not morose. In fact, as one journalist pointed out, they acted very much like their sighted counterparts at other institutions where students had taken action to demand educational reforms.³⁸ Like their sighted student counterparts, news reporters countered students' actions with accusations of ingratitude.

Many, if not most, sighted activists assumed that because education provided a revolutionary escape from dependent isolation, blind students and in particular male blind students who received such an education would be profoundly grateful for the opportunity. Gratitude was a civilizing force that was used in almost all charitable situations as a marker of mental health and social adjustment. In many institutional

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

reports the ability of an internee to express gratitude for care and/or treatment was more important than outcomes outside the institution. Ingratitude from a student was, for many institutional professionals, a marker of "defectiveness" and was itself seen as a symptom of mental instability. A single student with poor behavior and a pronounced lack of gratitude was therefore easily dismissed as mentally defective. This was even simpler if the student was already disabled as able-bodied educators anticipated defect. In the case of the student strike, however, it was difficult to apply the argument to the student body as a whole. The image of the docile and quiet blind man had become deeply ingrained in the minds of the reading public. The students' actions were such a radical departure from the existing archetypes of the blind that it was difficult for many to accept that conditions at the INC did nothing to warrant the students' ire. For many, another explanation was necessary to explain the students' collective action.

Bartolomé Ayrolo's Investigation

Following the student strike the Ministry of Public Instruction stepped in and initiated an investigation.³⁹ In their letter appointing an inventor at the INC the MIP was careful not to give the impression that their actions were the direct result of the student strike. Instead they indicated that a full investigation of the INC was necessary as a result of an array of incidents over a span of several years, not the least of which were the recent student actions. Their chosen interventor was Bartolomé Ayrolo, the director of the *Instituto Nacional para Sordomudos* (The National Institute for Deaf-mutes, hereafter

³⁹ Ostensibly the school was no longer under the jurisdiction of the MIP because it had been rolled into the structure of the IAC, which was part Public Assistance. As the mismanagement of the INC by the IAC was at the heart of the investigation, the institution was not allowed to conduct its own investigation. The participation of the MIP was largely the result of the students' initial contact with them at the time of the strike.

INSM) since 1885. He was chosen because the Minister of Education declared him, "a professional preferentially dedicated to the teaching of abnormal children, and who is also a specialist in establishments with internees."⁴⁰ Ayrolo's investigation, released in late December of the same year, focused almost exclusively on the students' actions and their character in his subsequent report. Ayrolo structured the bulk of his investigation around two methods, observation and an extensive interview process. Ayrolo learned from interviews with student that students communicated extensively with members of La Fraternal and had formulated many of their opinions about the INC through those communications. He then chose to interview as many members of La Fraternal as he could contact. He even interviewed a wide array of alumni from the institute, some living in the provinces.⁴¹

Ayrolo's observations of the students in the school stand in marked contrast to almost every other piece of writing regarding the blind at this time. While most characterizations printed during this period made liberal use of the melodramatic figure of helpless blindness, Ayrolo implied that the blind were manipulative, arrogant, and paranoid. At times he suggested that these traits were inherent to blindness and at others that they were learned behavior resulting from an overly permissive atmosphere. He argued that at the heart of events at the school was the society La Fraternal who were, "...powerfully influential in animating the spirit of the blind to the idea of rebellion and

⁴⁰ "Instituto Nacional de Ciegos," *Memoria del Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública, Departamento de Justicia*, vol. 4 (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos de la Penitenciaría Nacional, 1918), 270. *...es un profesional que se ha dedicado preferentemente a la enseñanza de niños anormales, como asimismo que es un especialista en establecimientos que cuentan con internados.*

⁴¹ Sadly, though we know from his own accounts that he meticulously took notes on and filed all of these interviews with his report to the MIP, the location of the records for this Ministry for the years in question are at this time unknown.

with it the hope of a more free and happy life."⁴² Through his interviews he learned that the society maintained extensive contact with students through a handful of older students who acted as leaders during the strike. Most of these students no longer attended regular classes and had extensive free periods during which they presumably maintained relationships outside of the institute. Communications between students and the organization were an exchange. La Fraternal shared ideas with the students and the students kept La Fraternal informed about the function and structure of the INC, or as Ayrolo described these communications, "students inform them with frequency of the novelties they believe they observe."⁴³

In detailing the influence of the organization on the rebellious interneers Ayrolo focused on the portion of La Fraternal's guidelines that stated, "to the exclusion of all foreign elements."⁴⁴ It disturbed Ayrolo that members of La Fraternal believed that they were capable of interacting with society without the intervention of the sighted. He insinuated that the organization's attitude was absorbed by the students and demonstrated the "excessive pride" of the blind who refused to be "guided by the sighted."⁴⁵ With a certain amount of ridicule, Ayrolo described how some of the blind with whom he spoke believed that they had superior intelligence. He stated that certain members of the society were "convinced" that they had illuminated brains, similar to that of Helen Keller, that allowed them to "see" better than the sighted because they "didn't have eyes in their face

⁴² Ayrolo, "Informe to S. E. el Señor Ministro de Justicia e Instrucción Pública," 272. *...influido poderosamente para animar en el espíritu de los ciegos la idea de rebelión y con ella la esperanza de una vida más libre y feliz.*

⁴³ Ibid. *...que los alumnos la informaran con frecuencia de las novedades que creían observar en él.*

⁴⁴ See footnote 23.

⁴⁵ Ibid. *...pero no se inclinan así no más a dejarse guiar por videntes, en virtud de su excesivo orgullo.*

to dazzle them." For Ayrolo, the arrogance and pride demonstrated by members of the society infected the older students at the institute and generated the false idea that they could become genuinely independent and political citizens.⁴⁶

What Ayrolo ignores in his critique of La Fraternal's attitudes was that propaganda campaigns for the INC, the IAC, and all smaller projects before and between promoted the ideal that La Fraternal both advocated and symbolized. Education was supposed to create independent blind male citizens who would not be "dead weights" around societies theoretic neck. Apart from a handful of Mendoza's publications, propaganda on blindness insinuated that education eliminated dependence on the sighted. If anything the ability of the students to join a political organization, move freely and confidently in their own neighborhood, and form complex theoretical arguments regarding their rights and responsibilities within society were, according to sighted propagandists own assertions, signs of their program's success. Instead, for sighted activists, and even some of the blind educators at the INC, La Fraternal and the student movement was an example of a corruption of the project, a straying from the proposed goals. This was again due to a fundamental disconnect between the discourse of social aid for the blind and deeply held beliefs about the blind and their function in society. For sighted activists the blind were from the beginning and would always be "defective" citizens. Education, workshops, and very specific forms of occupational training might ease society of the burden of the unsightly blind beggar, but their defective status meant that they were never intended to integrate fully into society. For many of the sighted activists writing on the blind, they did not need to state that the blind would always need

⁴⁶ Ibid., 272-273.

the sighted. It was understood. Therefore the liberal positivist goal for social services was to control and direct the ways the blind needed the sighted, not to eliminate that need.

Ayrolo found the rhetoric of equality promoted by La Fraternal dangerous when combined with what he considered the highly susceptible nature of blind children. In his report he negated the desire expressed by the students to live, "a life more free and happy," by placing their rebellion in a conspiratorial narrative. He suggested that their ideas were the product of imaginary games generated through the prodding of foreign influences, i.e. La Fraternal.⁴⁷ He labeled the students communications with members of La Fraternal as a system of espionage. "The boom in secret correspondence, the whisperings, and this entire type of goings on, has been a factor in convincing the blind that the institution is flawed and corrupt."⁴⁸ He insinuated that this atmosphere was manufactured and maintained by older students with too much free time for amusement. He therefore doubly dismissed all concerns expressed by La Fraternal. Members of the organization lived in a fanciful world in which they were the superiors to the sighted. They were therefore easily deluded by "foreign" ideas regarding their rights. In addition, bored, fanciful, older students created an imaginary world of corruption within the institute and fed those stories to the members of La Fraternal living outside of it. Therefore, La Fraternal was both deluded and mislead.

If fraternization between La Fraternal and students at the INC was the core problem at the institute, the secondary issue was the presence of older male students. The proper age of a student population in institutions for the blind was an issue that developed

⁴⁷ Ibid., 273. *...el auge de la correspondencia secreta, los cuchicheos y toda esa serie de hechos, que han contribuido en los ciegos a formarles el convencimiento de que en la institución todo está viciado y corrompido.*

⁴⁸ Ibid.

as early as 1890 and continued well into the twentieth century. At the school in the Asilo de Huérfanos, inspectoras de turno continually confronted the problem of older male students who because of age were considered disruptive presences. Prior to 1908, the SBC adopted a policy of shifting these young men from the classroom at the Asilo de Huérfanos to the Asilo de Mendigos. After 1908, however, the director of the Asilo de Mendigos began to reject the entry of these young men on the basis of their age. In May of 1909, for example, the SBC tried to transfer nineteen-year-old Santiago Carlos and twenty-year-old Miguel Vega to the Asilo de Mendigos. The two young men refused to stay confined to the newly constructed building for the blind at the Asilo and continued to try to mix with the sighted population where, according to the inspectoras, they caused a great amount of trouble. The Asilo refused to accept the two, but suggest that the society contact Eva San Roman at the INC and request that the two enroll at that school. Despite their ages and prior schooling, Eva San Roman accepted the students' enrollment at the INC.⁴⁹

For Bartolomé Ayrolo the continued presence of older male students no longer attending classes at the institute was unacceptable. At the INSM he adhered to a rigid policy that no student was to remain at the institute if they were not in class or if classes were not in session. Over the course of their relationship with the INSM, the SBC routinely attempted to circumvent these rules by forgetting to pick up students at the end of the school year, sending students who finished their course work back to the institute the following year, or simply requesting that students remain at the institute indefinitely

⁴⁹ Letter from Alvina van Praet de Sala to Sra. Presidenta de la Sociedad de Beneficencia, May 31, 1909, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1901-1909, legajo 93.

despite prior rejections of this request.⁵⁰ In each instance Ayrolo categorically denied the SBC's attempts to circumvent his policy. Throughout his tenure at the INSM he remained rigidly committed to the educational model for the school. Once students graduated it was their responsibility to make their own way.

Ayrolo's definitive ideas about what an institute should and should not do, reflected his attitude about what a student should and should not be. In the course of his investigation Ayrolo found the presence of older males students worrying because these males developed troublesome political ideals and adopted the roles of protectors of the younger students. In contrast, he indicated that the girls involved in the strike had characters whose, "shades are much softer and if they are not very modest nor humble they manifest more moderate, with less pride, are more respectful to their superiors and know how to show the sweet satisfaction of gratitude..."⁵¹ Again, the girls' ability to demonstrate gratitude for their existence at the INC was a sufficient enough indicator of their better characters to over ride their lack of humility and modesty. Despite Ayrolo's assertions that at the root of the trouble with the students were "natural" tendencies and characteristics of the blind, his evidence suggests that he took greater issue with student actions.

Ayrolo made little attempt to differentiate gendered characteristics between blind males and females. He identified egotism, pride, arrogance, and rebelliousness as negative attitudes characteristic of all the students. The girls' lack of humility and

⁵⁰ AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1855-1901, legajo 92; and AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo de Huérfanos, 1901-1909, legajo 93.

⁵¹ Ayrolo, "Informe to S. E. el Señor Ministro de Justicia e Instrucción Pública," 274. *...las tintas son mucho mas suaves, y bien no son muy modestas ni muy humildes, se manifiestan más moderadas, tienen menos orgullo, son se manifiestan más moderadas, tienen menos orgullo, son más respetuosas con sus superiores y saben exteriorizar las dulces satisfacciones de la gratitud...*

modesty was as problematic for them as for the boys. The key difference between the two genders was not explained by inherent differences between males and females but rather differences in their mode of education.⁵² Ayrolo inferred that the girls' education better equipped them for life in an institute or a home. Unlike the boys, who began to believe that they were capable of an independent life separate from familial or social care, the girls were trained to accept at least some level of dependence. Their education readied them for the role of domestic support in the home. They were not prepared, nor did they expect to be prepared to sustain themselves through their own earnings. Training in the girls section anticipated female reliance on male earnings. For Ayrolo, the knowledge of their life long dependence prevented loneliness and "bad thoughts" that might lead them to develop the "hot" emotional states exhibited by the male students.⁵³ Male students on the other hand were led to believe that they were being trained in order to gain independence and to earn a living wage. Ayrolo believed this set a dangerous precedent in which the male students came to believe the fantasy of independence.

Male students' "delusions" that they may some day be able to move freely about the city drove their irrational rebelliousness. The older males education was therefore incomplete, which Ayrolo suggested was more dangerous than the incomplete education of the sighted because of the natural tendency to egotism and other "less than noble" characteristics inherent to blindness.⁵⁴ He suggested that because male students were not sufficiently prepared for dependence envy as much as ego was at the root of the problem

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. *...se desenvuelve al calor de constantes afectos, por cuyo motivo no prefieren esa soledad que tan mal suele hacer pensar a los videntes y con doble razón a los ciegos.*

⁵⁴ Ibid. *...deja transparentar sus sentimientos egoístas y nada nobles.*

of the undereducated or poorly educated blind individual. Ayrolo argued that over the course of their training at the INC male students received too much praise, in particular for their musical work. This praise fed their belief that they were competent and independent individuals. He asserted that for these blind when their daily life was filled with praise they became filled with "presumption and pride."⁵⁵

Surprisingly, Ayrolo did not blame the staff of professors and caretakers at the INC for the over indulgent education of the young men at the institute. In his report he found the majority of the staff to be well meaning, dedicated, and frustrated with the lack of discipline of the institute.⁵⁶ Besides La Fraternal, the true culprit generating the toxic atmosphere was the well intentioned but ignorant members of the Directive Committee of the IAC. When the IAC took over management of the institution, members of the Directive Committee, particularly José Pérez Mendoza, began to insert themselves into daily life at the school. They attended classes, met with students of all ages, and most importantly for Aryolo, consistently interfered in the disciplinary decisions of both staff and the directora. It was these men who showered praised on the older male students and made them believe in their ability to lead independent lives. Aryolo argued it was also these men who generated an atmosphere of disorder and chaos in the school through their constant interference in the disciplinary regime.⁵⁷

Ironically, however, even as he admonished the members of the Directive Committee for their undisciplined attitude toward the students he was forced to

⁵⁵ Ibid. *Estos ciegos, en cuya categoría coloco a la mayor parte de los adultos varones que figuran en el presente sumario, son naturalmente desconfiados y de ahí su creencia de que todo el mundo se ocupe de ellos por egoísmo o envidia.*

⁵⁶ Ibid., 274-278.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

acknowledge that the students did not return the committee members devotion. To the contrary, the students developed a deep distrust of the members of the Directive Committee as was exemplified by their demand during the strike for the implementation of the Republica del Niño. In an interview with Ayrolo, one teacher remarked on the relationship between the students and committee members stating, "that these men have created ravens that take out the eyes and that they never thought that the blind were so ungrateful with those who lavished such fatherly treatment."⁵⁸ In another instance, a committee member (presumably José Pérez Mendoza again) approached the students about creating their own magazine in which they could detail their beliefs about the future of the blind in Argentina. At first the students reacted to the invitation with enthusiasm, but after discovering that the invitation was derived from a member of the directive committee they balked and did not pursue the project further. According to Ayrolo, when a professor asked one of the students why the project no longer held any interest the student supposedly replied, "This enthusiasm to help us...we think is just some way to keep tabs on us."⁵⁹ Again, regardless of interpretation it is clear that the students developed a deep suspicion of the administrative apparatus at the institution that superseded all attempts to rectify the situation.

In his summation Ayrolo suggested several things. First he rejected the vast majority of the claims issued by students regarding abuse and inappropriate behavior on the part of staff at the INC. Second, he recommended that a well-trained, enthusiastic, and disciplined director be found for the institute to replace the departing Maria Luisa

⁵⁸ Ibid., 275. *Que estos señores han criado cuervos para que les saquen los ojos y que nunca pensó que los ciegos fueran tan ingratos con quienes les prodigaron un trato paternal.*

⁵⁹ Ibid., 279. *Este entusiasmo por ayudarnos...pensamos que es por algo que a él le tendrá más cuenta que a nosotros.*

Gallian.⁶⁰ Thirdly, he suggested that the INC be clearly defined as either a school, an asylum, or a reformatory, but not all three. He recommended that the various functions of the institution be broken into separate facilities and that the INC itself be oriented strictly to primary education to students no older than fifteen years of age. Finally, Ayrolo harshly critiqued the Directive Committee's interference at the school and suggested that the INC be placed firmly back in the control of the MIP rather than that of the IAC.

When a summary of Ayrolo's report was issued in Congress in late December of 1917 and then again in the press in January of 1918, it instigated another round of reforms within the institution. The initial reaction of La Fraternal was wholesale rejection of Ayrolo's report and its insinuation that troubles at the institute were the product of foreign agitation and over active imaginations. They reasserted that very real problems of poor treatment existed at the INC that needed to be addressed. However, as the months progressed and the Ministerio de Instruccion Publica failed to address the suggestions detailed by Ayrolo's report, La Fraternal began to agitate against the MIP to begin to initiate action. The reason for this conversion was that while the internal report to the MIP indicated that La Fraternal was responsible at least in part for student actions in early September, Ayrolo's published summary did not mention La Fraternal. Instead, Ayrolo's suggestions for reorganizing the institute closely mirrored the desires of La Fraternal. His suggestion to separate and institutionalize the various functions performed by the INC into an array of facilities essentially called for the full implementation of Law 9339. Additionally, La Fraternal themselves identified the Directive Committee of the

⁶⁰ In reality Ayrolo found little wrong with Gallian's administration of the school in the light of the constant interference from the Directive Committee. It appears that Gallian was a recent replacement for another incompetent director, was still very young, and did not have adequate training for the position. In light of this Ayrolo accepted her resignation, but believed she would make an excellent Vice-Director.

IAC as the principal culprit creating disorder at the INC. In their manifesto from June of 1917, they called for the INC to be taken out of IAC hands and placed back under the direction of the MIP.⁶¹ In essence, Ayrolo's summary of the situation at the INC supported several of the principal goals of La Fraternal and therefore after a brief period they began to ignore the insinuations made about their own organization in the full report and to agitate in favor of the reforms indicated in Ayrolo's summary.

Unlike La Fraternal, José Pérez Mendoza and other members of the Directive Committee initially welcomed Ayrolo's report as it seemed to back their own attempts to secure land and construction permits to build the facilities that Ayrolo suggested be separated from INC operations. Directly following the release of the summary in January, Mendoza published an article of his own praising the call for more establishments and placing pressure on the MIP to comply by giving the IAC the clearance necessary to begin construction.⁶² However, as time passed it became clear that the MIP intended to carry through with only two of the proposed suggestions detailed by Ayrolo. First, they removed all of the older students and placed an age cap of fifteen at the school. Secondly, the ministry took aim at the IAC and began to dismantle the Directive Committee. Mendoza and a majority of the other members of the committee were dismissed. Mendoza attempted to fight back in the press by publishing article after article defending his actions, detailing the obstructions he faced in implementing Law 9339, and describing the ongoing injustices against the blind in Argentina. Aside from the piece "por los ciegos" in which he describes the obstacles that prevented him from pursuing the

⁶¹ La Fraternal, "Instrucción Publica: 'La Fraternal.'"

⁶² José Pérez Mendoza, "Por los ciegos: antecedentes y actuales," *La Nación*, January 31, 1918, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/21/2012).

construction of the IAC, much of the material published in 1918 was recycled from articles used to promote the passage of the law. Mendoza's campaign did little good. He was dismissed from the board of the IAC in early 1918 and over the next several years faded from organizing on blind issues.

Conclusions

The student strike of 1917 highlighted rather than resolved the divisions between sighted activists for the blind and the political blind who advocated for blind issues. Nearly two years after the strike the INC remained in chaotic flux. It did not have a permanent director. Many of the older students had returned after a brief hiatus and none of the new institutions suggested by the Ayrolo were constructed. In 1919, Francisco Gatti wrote in one of his final letters that he was confident that after all that had occurred between 1910 and 1919 that the powers that be would finally realize their mistake in demoting him. He was confident that he would be offered the directorship of the INC and the wrongs done over the last decade would be righted.⁶³ Instead, Gatti was quietly told to retire from his position at the school lest he be fired. It was a devastating blow to him and no explanation was provided. In light of Ayrolo's assessment that the blind students at this institute had become too arrogant in their belief they could live independent lives, perhaps the Ministry of Public Instruction came to believe Gatti's presences was a bad influence. Whatever the cause, the debacle of the teens at the INC firmly closed the issue of blind institutions at the national level for the next two decades. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the creation of new institutions for the blind entered private, provincial, and municipal hands, while the federal government remained resolutely silent. It also

⁶³ Francisco Gatti, "carta abierta."

dramatically diminished the role of sighted liberal professionals in organizations for the blind. In the decades after the strike, the most influential institutions for the blind were built and controlled by blind leadership.

Chapter Five

"They are Generally Intelligent:" Blindness, Eugenics, and Blind Leadership in the 1920s

Introduction

Prior to the 1917 strike, news articles about the blind in widely read presses like *La Nación* and *La Prensa* projected a positive image of blindness and blind education to the outside world.¹ After the student strike, news articles focused on the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of the national institute while at the same time dwindling in quantity. Without stable leadership, the Instituto Nacional para Ciegos and the Instituto Argentino para Ciegos ceased to produce information and propaganda about social services for the blind. This left a space for blind leaders to assert themselves in the public domain and begin to articulate new directions for social services for the blind. However, the strike divided blind leadership into those who advocated confrontation with the existing system of services and those who wanted to create a private system of services for the blind. As the rift between the two groups grew, the development of services for the blind stalled at a key moment.

As blind leaders deliberated over the best methods to push for better services for the blind, ideas about blindness, disability, and society were being debated among adherents of hereditary theories that proposed to improve the human condition by removing or controlling the reproduction of the unfit. By the 1920s and 1930s, it was clear that immigration to Argentina from Europe had not occurred in the way that

¹ See discussion in Chapter 3 about press coverage and images of blindness.

Argentines of the late nineteenth century anticipated. Late nineteenth century immigration supporters had believed that industrious immigrants from Northern Europe would move out into the provinces and in so doing help Argentina better develop and use its resources in the interior.² Northern European immigrants did not arrive and fill out the "empty" interior. In their place Southern and Eastern European immigrants arrived in the cities for factory work. Many arrived in the country only to leave again once they acquired the necessary experience and training to compete in similar industries in their country of origin. Concerns about the ability and desire of the populations to assimilate were deepened by medical practitioners assertions that Southern and Eastern Europeans were racially inferior in comparison to their Northern European counterparts. According to nineteenth century degenerative theories such as Social Darwinism or positivism, these less desirable races were more prone to disease, vice, moral decay, and less intelligent.

As this less desirable form of immigration reached its zenith, nineteenth century hereditary science gave way to twentieth century versions. Social Darwinists and positivists in the nineteenth century wanted to confine racial and physical inferiors to appropriate spaces where scientific treatments to correct their deficiencies could be applied. In the twentieth century, theories about heredity went beyond categorizing and controlling populations to propose policy that would eradicate the threat of degeneration posed by portions of humanity deemed unfit. In Latin America doctors and social scientists adopted a diverse array of positions on the subject of population control.

Contemporary scholars such as Nancy Stepan studying eugenics in the region highlighted

² Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Jose C. Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, trans. James P. Brennan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); and Morton D. Winsberg, *Colonia Baron Hirsch, a Jewish Agricultural Colony in Argentina* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1964).

Latin American preferences for Lamarckian or "soft" eugenics.³ This strain proposed that while in an embryonic stage, the hereditary makeup of a fetus could be altered by positive or negative environmental influences. Thus, degeneration might occur if the mother or father were an alcoholic, but a process of whitening might occur through healthy living, good education and strong morals. Mendelian, or hard eugenics, theorized that hereditary traits were immutable. Mendelian eugenics was associated with negative eugenic policies, or policies that sought to prevent eugenically unfit individuals from reproducing. The most extreme of these negative policies was euthanasia, practiced by the Nazis.

In Argentina and Latin America, the separation between negative or positive eugenics was not clearly delineated, nor was eugenics necessarily preferred as an approach. Most Argentine medical physicians preferred to use biotypology proposed by of Nicola Pende in the teens to diagnose and discuss degeneration within patients and society. When physicians did discuss eugenics, they debated the utility of negative policies and often defended such practices. After Nazi Germany passed its 1933 sterilization legislation, Dr. Enrique Díaz de Guijarro argued that "The sterilization law is more humane than the system that prohibits matrimony to the slow, at least in terms of illness spread through heredity and not communicable disease. To stop him from marrying and oblige an individual to perpetual celibacy is to annihilate the personality."⁴ Scholars examining hereditary theory in Argentina since the early publication of Stepan's work noted that though soft eugenic legislative policies tended to be more successful in

³ Nancy Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁴ Enrique Díaz de Guijarro, "Esterilización y matrimonio eugénico," *Revista de Criminología, psiquiatría y medicina legal: Órgano del Instituto de la Penitenciaría Nacional*, Año XXI (1934): 478. *La ley de esterilización es más humana aún que el sistema que prohíbe el matrimonio a los tarados, por lo menos en cuanto a enfermedades transmisibles por herencia y no por contagio. Impedir el matrimonio y obligar al individuo al celibato perpetuo, es aniquilar la personalidad.*

Latin America, adherence to Mendelian, or hard eugenic strains was common among medical practitioners.⁵ Scholar Yolanda Eraso, found that Argentine endocrinologists conducted extensive trials to find mechanisms for temporary sterilization techniques that could circumvent both government prohibitions and church objections to sterilization.⁶

Despite the heavy emphasis on race in scholarly literature on hereditary theories, the arguments that supported and gave value to these racial discourses utilized the language of disability. For contemporary adherents to hereditary theories, degenerative races were problematic because they introduced disabling qualities into the human race. The inherent weakness of certain races left them open to mental illness, intellectual weakness, physical deformity, sensory problems, and disease. Ophthalmologists focused on connections between immigrants of supposedly inferior races and the disease trachoma. They argued that Jews, Eastern Europeans and "Arabs" were inherently weak and susceptible to infectious diseases like trachoma.⁷ Whiteness, in contrast, represented strength and normalcy. The desirable Northern European races were supposedly resistant to disability and less likely to propagate disabled or weak persons. As a result discussions about race were often as much about disability as discussions about disability were about race. Argentine propensity for biotypology further allowed health and human scientists to discuss race through the language of disability by identifying types prone to certain conditions and disease that also conformed to certain ethnicities or races. Discussing

⁵ Yolanda Eraso, "Biotypology, Endocrinology, and Sterilization: The Practice of Eugenics in the Treatment of Argentinian Women during the 1930s," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 81, no. 4 (2007): 793–822; Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina*; Hochman, Di Liscia, and Palmer, *Patologías de la patria*; and Marisa Miranda and Gustavo Vallejo, eds., *Una Historia de La Eugenesia. Argentina Y Las Redes Biopolíticas Internacionales, 1912-1945* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2010).

⁶ Eraso, 816-817.

⁷ Arab was used to describe anyone of North African or Middle Eastern decent.

disability became a way to discuss race without actually discussing race. Key to that formulation, however, was the universal agreement that physical difference that fell on the disability portion of the spectrum was undesirable and necessitated eradication.

Discussions about hereditary inferiority in Argentina focused intently on issues surrounding intellectual health. Intellectual disabilities were key symptoms of degeneration that medical physicians and social scientists throughout western medicine and used to diagnose inferiority among the races.⁸ Intellectuality therefore, became a characteristic used to separate the eugenically unfit from those with disabilities resulting from misfortune. During the 1920s, as blind leaders were attempting to reignite interest in blind issues in Buenos Aires they were able to capitalize on the perspective furthered by ophthalmologists that the majority of blindness in Argentina was the result of accident or infection and was therefore not hereditary. As blind leaders began reach out to different segments of the population with new strategies to generate interest in the blind, the used intellectual production to prove the value of social services for the blind. This came at a moment when definitions of blindness expanded as a result of ophthalmologists' attempts to consolidate their authority in the medical-legal sphere of work accidents. Ophthalmologists' desire to control diagnosis and indemnification of work accidents, led them to create contingents of the population no longer fit to work as a result of their sight, and who now seemed to need the kind of social services proposed by blind leaders.

⁸ James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1994), 131-183.

Blind Leadership in the 1920s

After the student strike in 1917, political organizing by the blind divided, as activists reassessed their goals and methods. Functionally, reforms at the INC conformed to the demands made by blind activists at the time of the strike, but the framing of reforms ignored the reason for the students' and La Fraternal's demands. The students and La Fraternal wanted reorganization to be rooted in a greater equality for the blind and improved infrastructure to help students realize their independence. The Ministry of Public Instruction and administrators couched the reorganization of the INC as an attempt to gain control over a mismanaged institution. In the two years following the strike, a series of structural changes at the institution made it clear that the vision of activists and that of institutional authorities would not coincide.

The failure of the strike to reflect the vision of blind leaders drove members of La Fraternal in two directions. According to a friend and colleague of Julián Baquero, the strike and its failures caused a rift between Baquero and his co-founder of La Fraternal, Vicente Vercelli.⁹ After discussion with Francisco Gatti, Baquero agreed that social evolution from within the system was a more productive course of organizing than the more militant actions proposed by Vercelli and his supporters.¹⁰ Despite Baquero's concerns, Vercelli and his supporters continued to organize against the INC. In September of the year following the strike, in the newspaper *La Vanguardia* the organization called for a boycott of the institution by all families of blind children. They claimed that, "today like yesterday, the curriculum is still the same, absurd and

⁹ David López, "Julián Baquero: Su trayectoria tiflológica."

¹⁰ Pedro Rosell Vera, Introduction, in Francisco Gatti: Un destino asumido, unpublished document collection, Biblioteca Argentina de Ciegos, Buenos Aires.

inadaptable to the needs of the students, who can not extract more from it so that most of those who leave, after long years of study, are only prepared to sell cartons of cigarettes or candies in the public thoroughfare."¹¹ They also held protest lectures in public plazas during which former students of the INC informed the public via megaphone of the state of education for the blind in the country.¹² Vercelli's insistence on what Baquero considered militant action and his refusal to work with sighted allies divided the two leaders. As a result, Baquero severed his ties to La Fraternal and began to consider new ways to create services for the blind in Argentina.

In the period between Baquero's departure and his formation of a new organization for the blind, La Fraternal continued to monitor the chaotic post-strike situation at the INC. Between 1918 and 1922, structural reorganization at the institute focused on limiting and controlling the student population. Students older than sixteen were removed from the institution, non-Argentine citizens prohibited from entering, and the number of staff and faculty doubled while the student population remained the same. The most controversial change made in order to gain control of the institute was the creation of a regulation to exclude immigrants. Authorities were convinced that the presence of politically active immigrants in La Fraternal and among the students created discipline problems rooted in foreign ideologies, a fear reflected in conservative political elites attitudes toward the workers movement.¹³ The ban also reflected the nativist turn in

¹¹ La Fraternal, "En el INC: El attitude indecisiivo del gobierno," *La Vanguardia*, September 17, 1918, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/15/2012), 4. *...hoy como ayer, los planes de estudio son siempre los mismos, absurdos e inadaptables a las necesidades de los escolares, que no pueden extraer de ellos más provecho que salía de la escuela, después de larguísimos años de estudio, habilitados sólo para vender cajillas de fósforos o bombones en la vía pública.*

¹² "Conferencia," *La Nación*, March 7, 1918 World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/17/2012), 9.

attitudes toward immigration and the increased influence of hereditary theories. Institutional authorities did not want to encourage the immigration of undesirable populations such as the blind by providing them access to social services.

With the student population firmly under control after 1919, the Ministry of Public Instruction proceeded to ignore the INC. In 1920, *La Razon* stated with regard to the institute, "For some time this entity has fallen to near abandonment."¹⁴ After several years of monitoring the situation, in 1922 *La Fraternal* published a study about the INC intended to reveal the gross inefficiencies and failures at the Institute. In the study they traced the lives of seventy male graduates. They found that four had died; four were in prison; twelve had trained for new professions for themselves at their own expense; twelve were using skills learned at the INC; and thirty-eight were, "without occupation or means of sustaining themselves."¹⁵ In addition they found that, of the alumni surveyed, only ten could read and write correctly; fifteen were able to read and write but without correct spelling or knowledge of grammatical rules; and the remaining forty-five could only read with great difficulty or were illiterate. The failings of the institution came at a heavy financial cost to the state, argued *La Fraternal*. They paid the equivalent of thirty-

¹³ Joel Horowitz, *Argentina's Radical Party and Popular Mobilization, 1916-1930* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008); Mirta Zaida Lobato, *La Vida En Las Fábricas: Trabajo, Protesta Y Política En Una Comunidad Obrera, Berisso, 1904-1970*, Colección Entrepasados Libros (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2001); Juan Suriano, *Paradoxes of Utopia Anarchist Culture and Politics in Buenos Aires, 1890-1910*, trans. Chuck Morse (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2010); Richard J. Walter, *The Socialist Party of Argentina, 1890-1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977); and Natalia Milanesio, "Gender and Generation: The University Reform Movement in Argentina, 1918," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 505–529.

¹⁴ "Enseñanza a los ciegos," *La Razon*, September 23, 1920, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/8/2012), 6. *Tiempo hace que esa entidad ha caído en un casi abandono.*

¹⁵ "Lo que se ha hecho y debe hacerse por los ciegos: Una nota de "La Fraternal" al Ministro de Justicia e Instrucción Pública," *La Vanguardia*, December 22, 1922, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 10/18/2012), 1.sin ocupación o medio alguno de vida.

one thousand pesos a year per child so that they could be, "poorly prepared and less protected," by their graduation.¹⁶

To rectify the situation at the INC, La Fraternal crafted a fourteen-point plan to reform the institution and make it useful for its students. Many of the ideas were articulated in 1917 as part of the strike. The organization reiterated the desire for the Republica de los Niños, the full implementation of the Ley de Agote, and the need for trained and licensed professionals at the institute. They also recommended the reduction in the number of staff in order to cut cost and reduce the atmosphere of surveillance. The bulk of the suggestions made by the organization, however, focused on the creation of opportunities for young adults to find viable occupations. This included the creation of small musical groups and an institutional band that could be hired out for events; workshop facilities that would be open to the blind of all ages; the organization of bazaars and other events where blind in and outside the institute could sell their crafts; and finally creating ties between the institute and businesses that could employ blind alumni. In short, La Fraternal demanded that the national institute concern themselves with the lives of the adults that they ostensibly prepared for life outside of it. For La Fraternal, education for the blind lacked value if that education did not translate into meaningful employment.

Despite the split between La Fraternal and Julián Baquero, after the strike both focused their organizational skills on the problem of the adult blind. Unlike his former associates at La Fraternal, Baquero was not averse to working with sympathetic sighted allies to pursue his vision of reform. The same year that La Fraternal published its demands for the INC, Baquero and another former member of La Fraternal, Seigismundo

¹⁶ Ibid., 1. *...egresados malamente preparados y peor protegidos.*

Taladriz, founded *La Unión-Latino-Americano de Ciegos* (The Latin American Union of the Blind), "the first outline and first attempt to link and connect all the blind of Latin America..."¹⁷ The Unión reflected Baquero's own ideology of international socialism. He seemed to believe that the blind would only have a voice if recognized as a coherent unit that transcended national borders. The Unión was the second international organization he had attempted to form since arriving in the Americas, and all the projects that he participated in after the Unión had some element of international cooperation embedded in them. The most significant of those projects was the Biblioteca Argentino de Ciegos formed on September 18, 1924 by Baquero, sighted ophthalmologist Dr. Augustin C. Rebuffo, Maria C. Marchi (blind), and the sighted author Alberto de Vere Larran.

From the outset the library was intended to be a dynamic institution whose mission extended well beyond the provision of books. Like the popular libraries of leftist political organizing, the library was to serve as a community center where knowledge and culture could be circulated and produced within the blind community and outward from it to broader sectors of the Buenos Aires public. The goal of the founders was to reach out to the blind adult population that had been disserved or ignored by early attempts at organizing education for children. This meant offering Braille literacy classes to those who lost their sight after puberty, reading services, workshops and other forms of vocational opportunities. Leaders within the BAC also served as the mouthpiece of the blind community to the sighted. From the outset the principle obstacle that the community faced was acquiring the necessary resources for the enterprise. The problems and public scandals at the INC over its fifteen years in operation seriously eroded the

¹⁷ "Lo que fué Vincenta Castro Cambón para la 'Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos,'" *Hacia la Luz* 1, no. 2 (June, 1928): 2. ...*primer esbozo y primer intento de vincular y relacionar unos con otros a todos los ciego latino-americanos...*

publication of positive articles about the blind in Buenos Aires between 1919 and 1924. This meant that the BAC couldn't rely on the same channels of resources to obtain support.

To gain public support for their cause, the BAC faced a daunting challenge. Though there were many individuals who still acknowledged the necessity for services for the blind, the failures at the INC arrested the development of blind services in Buenos Aires. Two factors kept the issue of blindness in the public eye and under discussion during these years. The wide spread use of chemical weapons during World War I created an unprecedented number of young blind men in Europe. European immigrants in Buenos Aires maintained strong ties to their homes and expressed deep concern about the fate of their countrymen. Ethnic organizations raised the issue of the war blind in numerous newspaper articles. They also conducted fundraisers and benefits, during and after the war, to raise funds to send to European organizations attempting to address the problems the men faced once they returned home.¹⁸ In the post war years, the primary focus of these organizations was the reeducation and retraining of soldiers for the workforce. These discussions about developments for blind soldiers in Europe provided way for blind leaders to for the blind in Argentina. They also kept alive discussions about innovation and experimentation in the world of blind occupational education. The articles about soldiers were important because they continued to demonstrate that blind education had the potential to revolutionize adult lives. This trope in turn aided the BAC's mission to rebuild support for programs and services for the blind in porteño society. It is no

¹⁸ For example, "Los soldados ciegos," *La Nación*, January 30, 1918, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/17/2012); "En favor de los ciegos de la guerra," *La Razón*, September 4, 1920, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/08/2012); "A beneficio de los ciegos italianos de la guerra," *La Razón*, December 10, 1921, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/08/2012); and "Por los ciegos de la guerra," *La Nación*, October 18, 1921, World Newspaper Archive Database (accessed 11/08/2012).

surprise, therefore, that in its initial funding drives the BAC found significant support from ethnic organizations such as the *Sociedad Italiana Porta Pía de Río Cuarto* (The Porta Pía Italian Society in Río Cuarto), *Sociedad Española* (The Spanish Society), or the *Sociedad Israelita Educacionista* (The Israelite Educators Society).¹⁹

The BAC's mission was further aided by the increased interest in organizations for the blind outside of the Federal Capital. While the debacle at the INC created a lull in interest in the city, provincial leaders were beginning to show enthusiasm for social service projects for the blind. After his forced retirement from the INC, Francisco Gatti began working with the provincial government of Buenos Aires on a plan for an institute for the blind in La Plata, which would be modeled on his original institution the ICAS. The project came to fruition in 1922 as the *Instituto Regional para Ciegos* (Regional Institute for the Blind).²⁰ In Cordoba a group of ophthalmologists and students at the *Universidad de Cordoba* (University of Cordoba) formed *La Asociación Pro-Ciegos* (The Pro-Blind Association) with the objective to establish an workshop school in the province because, "It is the modern concept of the *psíquico-física* capacity of the blind, which has fortified the radiant notion that through the school-workshop they can be transformed into citizens of the Republic, into workers for its progress, those who live as negative elements y as social parasites."²¹ The BAC's commitment to provide services for the

¹⁹ "La casa propia," *Hacia la Luz* 1, no. 5 (September, 1928): 3; and "La casa propia," *Hacia la Luz* 1, no. 3 (July, 1928): 6. Other organizations include: Círculo de Aragón, Sociedad Italiana Unione Meridionale, Sociedad Italiana Giulio Cesare, and Círculo Italiano

²⁰ Francisco Gatti, *Proyecto para la creación de un Instituto Regional de Ciegos, presentado e 3 de julio de 1922 a Su Excelencia Don José Luis Cantilo por el Profesor especialista en la materia Señor Francisco Gatti* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Fontana, 1922).

²¹ F. Garzon Maceda, "Algo sobre psicologia y educacion de los ciegos," *Revista de la Universidad de Córdoba* 5, no. 2 (April 1918): 297-298. *Es el concepto moderno de la capacidad psíquico-física del ciego, el que a fortalecido la noción radiosa de que por medio de la escuela-taller se pueden transformar en*

blind throughout Argentina attracted support from around the country including: *Centro de Empleados de Comercio Córdoba* (Center of Commercial Employees of Córdoba), *Municipalidad de Gaiman* (Chubut) (Municipality of Gaiman), and *Logia Masónica 'Estrella' de Tucumán* (Star of Tucuman Masonic Lodge).²² Interest in blind issues in the provinces did not always translate into concrete programs. Most provinces, especially those outside the litoral, relied on institutions in Buenos Aires to accommodate blind individuals into their programs. Children in particular were often sent to live and study in Buenos Aires from the provinces.²³ The BAC provided services to the literate blind in the provinces such as mailing Braille books and a multitude of radio programs designed for transmission throughout the country. Thus the BAC received significant support from organizations in the provinces concerned with blind issues, but without the resources to mount institutions or organizations of their own.

Hereditary Theories, Intellectuality, and Blindness

Support from ethnic societies and provincial organizations could not provide nearly the resources necessary to create the vibrant space for the blind in the capital city imagined by Baquero and his associates. Only significant support from individuals and organizations in the Federal Capital could provide the organization with the capital to realize the breadth of their vision for the new organization. However, by the 1920s and 1930s, degenerative discourses that labeled certain disabilities and diseases as dangerous

ciudadanos de la República, en obreros de su progreso, los que viven como factores negativos y como parásitos sociales.

²² See footnote 8.

²³ See chapter five for more discussion of the role of blind institutions in Buenos Aires and the education of the blind from the provinces.

to the future of the human community began to influence the approach of professionals, politicians, and philanthropists to social institutions and services.²⁴ The new strain of hereditary theories went beyond identifying unfit populations to develop policies designed to eradicate the unfit from society. At the outset of the 1920s it was not clear where the blind fit in these theories. Eugenics entered the Argentine pantheon of theories about heredity in the 1920s and 1930s, but never dominated. As stated, most Argentine physicians, sociologists, and anthropologists preferred to associate more closely with biotypology, developed by Italian endocrinologist Nicola Pende in the 1910s and 1920s. Pende established a typology of the individual based on the study of heredity as well as on the combination of physical constitution (weight, height, muscular mass, cranial and hand proportions, etc.), temperament (neuro-endocrine system), and character (psychology). Different configurations of these qualities, leading ophthalmologists argued, produced different human types, some less desirable than others. Biotypology created a more malleable understanding of who constituted the unfit. Eugenics entered Argentine medical discussions as another component in hereditary medicine, one principally focused on generating policy initiatives rather than on developing its use as a diagnostic tool. The combination of theories is perhaps best exemplified by the title of

²⁴ Lila M. Caimari, *Apenas un delincuente: Crimen, castigo y cultura en la Argentina, 1880-1955*, Colección Historia Y Cultura (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Argentina Editores, 2004); Paula Halperin and Omar Acha, eds., *Cuerpos, géneros e identidades: Estudios de historia de género en Argentina*, Colección Situaciones (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Signo, 2000); Donna J. Guy, *Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*, Engendering Latin America (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Karen Mead, "Gendering the Obstacles to Progress in Positivist Argentina, 1880-1920," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 77, no. 4 (November 1, 1997): 645-75; Dora Barrancos, *Anarquismo, educación y costumbres en la Argentina: de principios de siglo*, Colección Las Alternativas Pedagógicas (Buenos Aires: Contrapunto, 1990); and María Silvia Di Liscia, *Higienismo, educación y discurso en la Argentina, 1870-1940* (Santa Rosa, Argentina: Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de La Pampa, 2004).

one of the leading publications on the subject, *Anales de Biotipología, Eugenesis, y Medicina Social* (The Annals of Biotypology, Eugenics, and Social Medicine).

For ophthalmologists racial degeneration theories coalesced around the eye disease trachoma or granulose conjunctivitis. Trachoma was the specter that ophthalmologists held up as the primary scourge of their age in the 1920s and 1930s. Like tuberculosis, trachoma was categorized as highly contagious, the product of bad hygiene and weak constitutions. Through out the 1920s, it became increasingly categorized as a disease of immigration that tainted the otherwise healthy Argentine population. Ophthalmologist J.M. Albaranque argued,

But, if these conditions are favorable for us, others, however, are detrimental to us. Among these is the entirely free character of our institutions, inspired by that constitutional dogma, that puts our land at the mercy of all the men of the world that would like to inhabit it in accordance with the arms open attitude that characterizes our people, ignorant, naive, and unprepared, that it extends the same landing stage for foreigners healthy of mind and body as that to the bad immigrant, full of physical and moral blights; or opens the doors to its home for the passer-by who sits at its table and stays the night, receiving in return for its hospitality the contagion that works its disgrace all through life.²⁵

To combat the supposed scourge ophthalmologists across Argentina joined societies like *La Sociedad Profiláctica para la Prevención de Tracoma y de la Ceguera* (The Prophylactic Society for the Prevention of Trachoma and Blindness, hereafter SPPTC).

²⁵ J.M. Albaranque, "Sobre profilaxis del Trachoma," *Anales de Biotipología, Eugenesis y Medicina Social* 3, no. 57 (December 15, 1935): 3. *Pero si aquellas condiciones nos son favorables, otras en cambio nos perjudican. Entre éstas el carácter libérrimo de nuestras instituciones, inspiradas en aquel dogma constitucional, que pone nuestro suelo a merced de todos los hombres del mundo que quieran habitarlo concorde con la actitud de brazos abiertos que caracteriza a nuestro pueblo, ignorante, ingenuo y desprevenido, que lo mismo tiende una planchada para el extranjero sano de cuerpo y espíritu, que para el mal inmigrante, lleno de lacras físicas y morales; o abre las puertas de su hogar para el viandante que se sienta a su mesa y pernocta, recibiendo en cambio de la generosa hospitalidad el contagio que labra la desgracia para toda la vida.*

These campaigns put ophthalmologists firmly beside other specialists who defined the fight against degeneration of the species through the lens of public health.²⁶

The supposed trachoma epidemic also highlighted the complicated relationship between ophthalmology, degenerative theory, and blindness during this period. Trachoma became the central concern for ophthalmologists sympathetic to degenerative theories. Though an infectious disease, in the SPPTC and societies like it categorized its victims in racial terms. They argued that, "The illness predominates in certain colonies of foreigners: Spanish, Syrians, Arabs in general, Israelites, Russians, and Italians. From these groups it spreads to Argentines, to the old and school age alike."²⁷ Certain regions in Argentina became specifically connected to the disease. Ophthalmologist asserted that in general Trachoma preferred hot, humid climates with an abundance of vegetation. In Argentina they claimed that the epidemic was concentrated in some regions of the litoral, Córdoba, Tucumán, Santiago del Estero and La Rioja, despite its dry climate.²⁸ They worried about the spread to what they considered the otherwise healthy Argentine population. One doctor claimed that, "In some schools Argentines account for the third largest group of infected behind Arabs and Jews."²⁹ According to leading

²⁶ For example, Diego Armus, *The Ailing City: Health, Tuberculosis, and Culture in Buenos Aires, 1870–1950* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Plotkin, *Freud in the Pampas*; Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina*; and Jorge Salessi, *Médicos maleantes y maricas: Higiene, criminología y homosexualidad en la construcción de la nación Argentina, Buenos Aires, 1871-1914* (Rosario, Argentina: B. Viterbo Editora, 1995).

²⁷ J. M. Albarenque, "Medicina Social: Sobre profilaxis del Trachoma: tema presentado al 5º Congreso Nacional de Medicina en Rosario," *Anales de Biotipología Eugensia y Medicina Social* 3, no. 57 (December 15, 1935): 6-7. *Predomina la enfermedad en ciertas colonias extranjeras: españoles, sirios, árabes en general, israelitas, rusos, italianos, extendiéndose a los argentinos, adultos como la población escolar.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8. *...en algunos establecimientos de educación, los argentinos ocupan ya el tercer lugar, por su número de tracomatosis, después de los árabes y judíos.*

ophthalmologists, Argentine eyesight was endangered by trachoma carried to the country through the immigration of inferior races susceptible to disease. Though blindness was a potential byproduct of the disease, blindness itself was not hereditary. The distinction was important in determining the place of the blind in discussions about heredity and disability, as opposed to heredity and race.

Historiographical discussions about degenerative theories in Latin America have predominately focused on the issue of race and racial whitening in the region.³⁰ When discussing the problem of racial degeneration, the propensity of physicians to encourage positive legislative policy over negative policies generally remains accurate so long as one notes the many exceptions. When physicians sympathetic to eugenics discussed disability, particularly mental and intellectual disability, the nature of those discussions were different. Individuals with mental illness and intellectual disability were often discussed by physicians and in journal articles as less than truly human. In an article in the porteño publication *Anales de Biotipología, Eugenesis, y Medicina Social*, one Peruvian doctor observed,

For any one who has ever been to an asylum for the retarded and mentally deficient or who has given thought to this gruesome picture of spurious flesh, of these bodies in overcrowded blocks, these limited caricatures of man, these horrendous faces that laugh and provoke screams, then they can understand without doubt how many times one is assaulted with the idea of euthanasia as merciful and saving.³¹

³⁰ Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*; Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina*; Eraso, "Biotypology, Endocrinology, and Sterilization;" Donna J. Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead: The Troubled Meeting of Sex, Gender, Public Health, and Progress in Latin America*, Engendering Latin America (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Miranda and Vallejo, *Una historia de la eugenesis*; David FitzGerald and David Cook-Martín, *Culling the Masses: The Democratic Origins of Racist Immigration Policy in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), E-book Library Database, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3301450> (accessed 02/22/2016).

³¹ Ernesto Ego Aguirre, "Algunos aspectos de la eugenesis en relación con el recién nacido," *Anales de Biotipología, Eugenesis, y Medicina Social* 3, no. 46 (June 15, 1935): 20. I do not have the original Spanish for this section.

Though the idea of euthanasia was rarely discussed as genuine option, when physicians discussed sterilization they often referenced mental or intellectual disability as the principle example for the necessity of such procedures. Some doctors included alcoholics, the morally corrupt, or the congenitally deaf and blind in their eugenic prescriptions. All doctors discussed the problem of the idiot, the moron, and the deranged. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, intellectual and mental normalcy was at the core of hereditary discourses as they applied to notions of disability. Intellectual and mental disability was dangerous and those with mental and intellectual disabilities were often subject to intense disgust.

The problem of intellectual and mental disability in Argentine society consumed the bulk of discussions about "abnormal" childhood developing in the late 1920s and 1930s. In medical articles, childhood abnormality was defined in a variety of ways and was described as any of the following: retarded, deaf, delinquent, mentally disturbed, blind, poor, unfortunate, weak, ill, and so on. The primary concern for physicians in these discussions was the rehabilitation of the abnormal child into adults who would disrupt and who might contribute to Argentine society. The retarded child was the most problematic, professionals debated whether or not science, medicine, nor education could rehabilitate the intellectually disabled on any level. Dr. Domingo Cabred, President of the *Comisión Asesora de Asilos y Hospitales Regionales* (The Assesorial Commision of Regional Asylums and Hospitals) stated at the opening of the *Asilo y Colonia para los Retardados* (Asylum and Colony for the Retarded) in 1908,

Dispensing with the deeply retarded, it is know that even the least degenerate not only can not recieve instruction in public schools, but they also constitute an element of disorder and even danger to the normal

school population. They are not adapted to social life, because these morally and mentally weak individuals are prone to fall and fall frequently into vice, crime and insanity.³²

Cabred's statement reflects a long-standing belief in Argentina that vice and delinquency were the products of poor education. If the intellectually disabled could not be educated and were therefore subject to these social ills, the only option would be confinement, exactly the kind of confinement that the Asilo y Colonia para los Retardados represented.

The ability of the blind to be educated diminished their threat to society, which helped to support medical professions assertions that blindness was not hereditary. In a textbook written to inform the public about improving the stock of the next generation, author Guido J. Blotti responded to the question, "Can a child of a blind marriage have normal sight?" He answered, "Blindness is not transmitted through heredity, another divine thing about nature, because of this a child from a blind marriage can have normal sight."³³ Despite Guido's assurances, blind individuals with intellectual disabilities or those whose blindness was the result of trachoma infections threatened to disrupt this idea that blindness was not hereditary. For blind leaders a key point of organizing became proving the blind's capacity for intellectual exchange. In her 1901 report on education for the blind Dr. Cecilia Grierson differentiated between the blind and the deaf on just this

³² Domingo Cabred, *Discurso pronunciado por el presidente de la Comisión con motivo de la colocación de la piedra fundamental de ese establecimiento el 15 de noviembre de 1908* (Buenos Aires: Imp. y Enc. de Hospicio de las Mercedes, 1908), 7. *Prescindiendo de los retardados profundos, sabido es que, aún los menos degenerados, no solo no pueden recibir en las escuelas comunes la instrucción necesaria, sino que también constituyen un elemento de desorden y aún de peligro para la población escolar normal. Tampoco se adaptan á la vida social, pues estos débiles mentales y anómales morales se hallan expuestos á caer y caen con frecuencia en el vicio, la delincuencia ó la locura.*

³³ Guido J. Blotti, *El Instructor de la Humanidad: Hacia el perfeccionamiento de las nuevas generaciones, Tratado de sociología practica, Antología enciclopédica código de la vida, Educación sexual* fragmento del tomo 2º: Sexología, at the Biblioteca de la Facultad de Medicina de la Universidad de Buenos Aires (no date), 98. *¿Puede tener la vista normal un hijo de un matrimonio ciego?...La ceguera no se transmite por la herencia, jotra cosa divina de la Naturaleza!, así que, un hijo de un matrimonio ciego debe nacer con la vista normal.*

basis, "This demonstrates that the blind man is intelligent in general, his misfortune almost always the result of accidental causes and not one of individual degeneration, as is almost always the case with deaf-mutes."³⁴ Grierson's statement indicated that she linked degeneration and intelligence, the absence of the latter constituting evidence of the former. In the two decades between Grierson's statement and the foundation of the BAC, the perception that blindness was caused by misfortune and that the blind were capable of normal intelligence increased among medical and educational professionals. Ophthalmologists deepened this connection by routinely asserting that Argentine blindness was the direct result of communicable disease and accidental injury. If heredity played a part in creating blind individuals, it was the problematic heredity derived from the immigration of disease prone races to the country.

Despite repeated assurances by ophthalmologists that Argentine blindness was not hereditary, medical professionals were still anxious about the existence of blind in the country.³⁵ In articles debating sterilization, doctors were initially careful to qualify that they were discussing hereditary blindness, but given ophthalmologists' use of hereditary weakness to understand the transmission of trachoma, what constituted hereditary blindness remained opaque. Historian Yolanda Eraso found that endocrinologists searching for temporary means of producing sterilization in women tested their techniques, sometimes through injections of sheep sperm in the uterus, in persons with disabilities, including those with blindness. Blindness may have been seen as non-

³⁴ Cecilia Grierson, "Institutos para ciegos," 411. *Esto muestra que el ciego es en general inteligente, siendo su desgracia casi siempre a una causa accidental y no á una degeneración del individuo, como sucede casi siempre con los sordomudos.*

³⁵ Some ophthalmologists conceded that there may be a few cases of blindness resulting from intermarriages between individuals too closely related to one another, but they always asserted that this was rare.

hereditary, but blind individuals could be categorized as unfit due to hereditary weakness connected to their race, ethnicity or multiplicity of disabilities. The potential of the blind to become useful, intelligent citizens had to be perpetually demonstrated in order to overcome multiple imaginings of the blind condition, not all of which were construed as non-threatening to the general population.

Cultural Production, Intellectuality, and Social Services for the Blind

Anxiety about the intellectual capacities of "abnormals" and the extent and form of services that they should receive formed the backdrop to blind leadership's fundraising and propaganda campaigns in the 1930s. As a result, the BAC was forced to wage a constant image campaign in order to convince potential sources of support that their project was aimed at a deserving population. Many of the techniques employed by the BAC to garner support for their institution were drawn from the same tradition as those employed by Francisco Gatti at the turn of the century. They held musical performances, dramatic readings, and poetry recitations for the public. As in early periods these performances reinforced assertions by sighted professionals that the blind were capable of normal and sometimes superior intellect. The most significant difference between events put on by the BAC and those by other organizations was the emphasis that the BAC put on cultural and artistic production. Early 19th and 20th century concerts by the blind tended to involve the blind performing or reciting classical pieces of music or literature as a way of demonstrating the blind's ability to reproduce the art of the sighted. BAC concerts emphasized original productions by the sighted and blind alike. BAC events functioned like artistic salons and drew to them artists, authors, and their

supporters. The BAC created an important center of cultural production that appealed to a variety of class interests and advertised the intellectual prowess of the blind without directly confronting the issue of intellectuality.

BAC concerts were not just directed to the social and political elite in society, though they did appeal to those groups. Like other institutions for the blind the BAC continued to find support from wealthy philanthropists such as María M. de Sánchez Díaz or Francisca Morandi de Morandi. They hosted teas for wealthy patronesses and concerts at places like Teatro Colon. They reached out to support from elite businesses, national and international alike. Despite their appeal to some members of the financial elite, the organization focused on gathering support from a plethora of divergent sectors. Some of these organizations represented businesses with significant interest in blind issues such as the *Ferrocarril Oeste* (The Eastern Railroad) and the *Ferrocarril Central Córdoba* (The Central Cordoba Railroad). As will be explained below, following changes in requirements for train drivers, rail companies found themselves with a group of former employees no longer qualified to work. Other organizations offer fewer clues for their support, such as the Federación Porteña de Fútbol (The Porteño Soccer Federation) or General Motors. What is clear is that BAC's project primarily appealed to two distinct sectors of society, middle-class artisans and non-union working class organizations.

As the BAC became increasingly associated with cultural production, it garnered a group of sighted artists who supported their endeavors. In terms of financial support they counted on aid from the *Asociación Argentina de Autores y Compositores de Música* (The Argentine Association of Authors and Composers of Music) and the *Asociación Sinfónica* (The Symphonic Association). More important than donations, however, were

the countless artistic paintings, sculptures, poems, stories, and lectures produced by these artists for use by the BAC. The first campaign run by the BAC auctioned works donated by several artists in an effort to raise the necessary funds to build their library. Included in these donations were paintings by artists Raquel Forner, Pío Collivadino, and Ítalo Baffi.³⁶ However, from the outset the BAC was careful to balance productions by sighted artists with those done by the blind and therefore also auctioned "Rumores de mi noche," by Vicenta Castro Cambón. The magazine produced by the BAC, *Hacia la Luz*, was another excellent example of the BAC mixing sighted and blind artistic production to their advantage. The magazine peppered a small number of informative articles about the blind among poems and short stories by blind and sighted authors. The magazine was published in print and Braille, though the content of the Braille version diverged from that of the print. The print version was more directly targeted to the sighted to gain support for the blind cause. The magazine was an international publication and was distributed all over the Americas. This gave young authors like Rosario Beltrán Nuñez, a poet from Santiago del Estero, significant exposure at the beginnings of their careers, while established artists like Pío Collivadino gained positive recognition for the association with a humanitarian project.

The relationship between the BAC and the middle class artists connected to it was based on reciprocity. Both groups received exposure and support by being connected. The BAC's attraction to certain sectors of the organized working class was less about how the BAC attracted financial support and more about what they did with it. As addressed in chapter three, blind leaders in Argentina had a history of cooperating with

³⁶ Raquel Forner was at the time a young art student and in 1924 received her first award for her work. Pío Collivadino was at the height of his career and was at the time the director of scenography at the Teatro Colon. Finally, Ítalo Baffi was of more obscure origins.

working class organizations. In the late teens, La Fraternal utilized the meeting rooms of the Socialist Party headquarters for their own gatherings and after the student strike the newspaper *La Vanguardia* became the outlet for La Fraternal's campaigns against the INC. Even after Baquero's split from La Fraternal, he remained a socialist, though he favored evolutionary socialism's commitment to change social structures from within them, and he was less overtly connected to the party. Ideologically the BAC was committed to equality of all persons regardless of their gender, race, or religion. They drew support from a number of ethnic associations including the Jewish Sociedad Israelita Educacionista as well as from Chinese business owners from the *Confitería Los Dos Chinos* (The Two Chinese Confectionary). The BAC ensured that women held key leadership positions and it developed vocational training programs for women as well as men. The first factory built by the BAC employed exclusively blind women because the BAC felt that blind women were more vulnerable than blind men to economic forces.

Though verbally committed to equality, organized worker associations involved with the BAC were more interested in the organization's projects to improve the lives of blind men than those of women. Between 1860 and 1930 the number of males in Argentina outstripped the number of females as the result of immigration that was disproportionately male during this period.³⁷ The effect of the imbalance, according to historian Pablo Ben, was that men were able to successfully push women out of all sectors of work apart from domestic service, prostitution, and the putting-out-system. Unlike blind men, blind women could participate side by side with sighted women in the putting out system because they learned to knit and sew alongside their sighted kin or

³⁷ Rebekah Pite, *Creating a Common Table in Twentieth Century Argentina: Doña Petrona, Women, and Food* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 237. In 1914 the imbalance peaked at five hundred and thirty nine men to four hundred and sixty one women in the city of Buenos Aires.

care takers. In all the educational institutions in existence in Argentina at this time, vocational labor for girls took the form of exactly this type of training. Blind males, however, were perceived to need formal and specialized training in "blind crafts" in order to earn a wage. Blind men who were not formally trained formed part of the class of men labeled as vagrants, beggars, and parasites. As such they fell under the scrutiny of professionals who feared that idleness in lower class males created psychological degeneration that led to crime and vice. For working class organizations, it was imperative to prevent "good" workers who suffered the misfortune of losing their sight from falling into the undesirable position of mendicancy or vagrancy. As the number and types of industry increased, the number of men forced out of jobs due to ocular work accidents increased, so to did anxieties about the affect of idleness on the newly disabled.

The question of blind male labor during this period was deepened by the work of ophthalmologists studying the question of work accidents and indemnification in the provinces of Cordoba and Santa Fe. Ophthalmologists in these provinces carved a place for themselves in the field of Argentine ophthalmology by engaging with legal questions of sight that developed in the workplace. While porteño physicians focused predominantly on questions of public health and immigration, their colleagues to the north began to quantify sight in order to regulate the sight of workers. The work conducted by this circle of ophthalmologists operated using the framework of justice rooted in mathematical analysis that could only be conducted by trained specialists. They argued that by using precise measurement, detailed medical knowledge, and complicated algorithms ophthalmologists could arrive at a monetary figure that would accurately reflect the result of an eye injury incurred at work and therefore be just for both the

worker and the employer. Their arguments and their insertion into the regulation of workers sight had effects that extended beyond the individual cases brought before the tribunals. Their calculations of sight necessary for certain professions led to legislation that required the dismissal of hundreds of men from their positions as truck, bus, and cab drivers or as train conductors. They created mathematical equations that determined what type of work could be conducted, and by whom. In doing so they created contingents of adults (or perceived to create) who needed to be retrained to perform in fields where their now limited or lost sight was acceptable.

Compensation for injuries that occurred on work sites were legislated by law 9.688 passed September 27, 1915. The 1915 legislation provided indemnification if a worker died; in cases of "absolute and permanent" injury; in cases of "partial and permanent injury;" and in cases of "temporary incapacity."³⁸ The injury or illness had to be the result of the class of work that the worker had preformed for the year prior to his disablement and the worker's last employer was the individual liable for his condition. Perhaps most importantly for ophthalmologists interested in work accidents, pre-existing conditions and poor health could affect claims. The amount of indemnification a worker received after being hit in the eye by a small object might be diminished if the injury was accompanied by an infection such as trachoma that was perceived to aggravate the affects of the injury. To unravel the timing and nature of illness the legislation stipulated that medical personnel should examine the worker and provide the court system with an unbiased analysis of the workers claims. Ophthalmologists of the era argued that in cases

³⁸ Poder Ejecutivo Nacional Argentina, "Ley 9.688 Accidentes de Trabajo," *Diario de sesiones de la Camara de Diputados* (September 25-27, 1915): 539.

of eye trauma general practitioners lacked the necessary expertise to provide just analysis of these complex cases.

Carlos Weskamp produced the first publication regarding ocular work accidents in 1916 when he published his thesis titled, "Agudeza Visual Profesional accidentes del trabajo y su legislación." Weskamp argued that the recently passed law regulating work accidents was fundamentally flawed because it failed to address the unique and complicated circumstances surrounding ocular work accidents. He said, "It has forgotten to define the professional capacity of the injured worker in relation to his power of sight, a point of departure extremely important to the indemnification of the damage caused."³⁹ Unlike mobility issues, no global consensus existed regarding the quality of sight necessary for the growing number of professions included under the new legislation. Later ophthalmologists noted that "We must note, to this effect that the indemnification of an eye offers variations from zero to one hundred percent, following the criteria of the experts."⁴⁰ Due to the complex relationship between sight and the performance of tasks, only certified ophthalmologists were capable of arriving at a just solution to the problem of indemnification of ocular work accidents. Weskamp proposed that his thesis could provide the basis for additions to the existing law that would be "more or less equitable for the patrón and the worker."⁴¹

³⁹ Carlos Weskamp, *Agudeza Visual Profesional: Accidentes del trabajo y su legislación* (Córdoba: Imprenta Curas, 1916), 27-28. *Se ha olvidado definir la capacidad profesional del obrero lesionado, en relación al poder visual, punto de partida importantísimo en la indemnización del daño causado.*

⁴⁰ Atilio Tiscornia, Enrique Bertotto, and Juan Manuel Vila Ortiz, *Valorización de las incapacidades en los accidentes oculares del trabajo: Proyecto de legislación* (Buenos Aires: Establecimiento Gráfico Oceana, 1939), 41. *...haremos notar, a ese efecto que la indemnificación de un ojo ofrece variaciones del 0 al 100%, según el criterio de los peritos.*

⁴¹ Weskamp, *Agudeza Visual Profesional*, 28. *...más o menos equitativa para el patrón y el obrero.*

Calculating an equitable solution to indemnification of sight meant converting accidents into measurements and equations. Attempting to convert work accidents into mathematical equations was a common feature of European work accident legislation, but even between doctors of the same nationality there was little agreement on how to do accomplish this task.⁴² When Weskamp and his colleagues spoke about equity, however, they tended to see the potential for fraud lying predominately with the worker and not the patron. Weskamp, and most of his colleagues in the field, worried that workers took advantage of general practitioners without ophthalmological training in order to receive to coverage for pre-existing conditions. They also believed that workers attempted to convert small accidents that had minimal impact on their sight into more profound incidents through erroneous claims about the quality of sight needed to perform their tasks. To resolve this problem, Weskamp proposed that Law 9.688 be modified to include a system of equations and charts designed to provide a dispassionate and objective mechanism to resolve the complex cases of worker eyesight. To begin, Weskamp observed that a "normal" eye could appreciate objects one tenth of a millimeter in size at a distance of thirty-three centimeters. He assigned the value of one to the eyesight of individuals who could see this well. However, he argued there were few jobs required normal eyesight to be performed and it was therefore necessary to arrive at an agreement about the minimum quality of sight necessary to perform each job. In cases in which a worker's sight diminished only slightly but remained within the acceptable range to continue his occupation, the patron would not be responsible for any monetary consequences of the accident.

⁴² Ibid., 33-46. Weskamp discusses this debate in the opening pages of this thesis.

To simplify the process of quantifying the professional sight requirements, Weskamp divided all professions into three groups. Jobs that required an *Agudeza Profesional* ranging between one and sixty-six one hundredths visual capacity in both eyes were labeled visually superior professions. The second category required the same visual range in at least one eye, but not both. The third category required a visual capacity of at least sixty-six one hundredths in one eye and thirty-three one hundredths in the other. Included in his lists of professions used to establish his three categories, however, were several professions included in vocational training programs for the blind. This included: carpenters, musicians, tobacconists, and telegraph operators.⁴³ Weskamp provided no logic to explain why certain professions required superior sight and others inferior sight. His categories seemed to be produced through a process of observation and assumption. For example, he placed musicians in the second category requiring better than sixty-six one hundredths sight in at least one eye. This was presumably because they needed to read music. However, this was only one mode of paid musical production. Many musicians played from memory or through a process of improvisation. Tango and jazz, two increasingly popular genres during this period, were frequently produced through this second method. This is one of the reasons why music was a popular vocation for the blind in Argentina. Many of the schools for the blind had active music programs before they had sheet music in Braille.⁴⁴ Weskamp's professional categories of sight were therefore, largely rooted in his own assumptions as a middle class professional of the nature of work he categorized.

⁴³ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁴ Francisco Gatti's letters indicate that he ordered the schools Braille sheet music at least a year after opening his school for the blind. He began teaching music in the first year.

Beyond the percentage of sight necessary for a task, Weskamp argued that the real complexity in these cases was determining a worker's quality of sight before and after a work induced accident or injury. To do this, ophthalmologists had to separate pre-existing conditions from those resulting from the accident. In most cases this required a high level guess work about what the affect of a pre-existing infection might have on a chemical burn, for example. In one case in which a man who suffered a lesion on his left eye at work, but whose right eye had been very weak prior to the accident, the examining doctor attempted to calculate the percentage of sight he would have lost naturally in his good eye as a result of the strain placed on it by the weakened eye. This was in order to subtract the projected natural loss of sight from the accidental losses.⁴⁵ This balance of pre-existing problems with accidental losses meant that many workers who could no longer get work in their field as the result of an ocular accident did not receive full or any indemnification for their loss. Without indemnification they were vulnerable to the idleness and vagrancy feared by workers organizations.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, ophthalmologist grew increasingly concerned with the legal implications of sight, and began to insert themselves into a wider range of legal issues. They intensely debated the quality of sight necessary to drive motorized vehicles and were instrumental in banning men with one eye from becoming rail and truck drivers. The question of the work accident remained an area in which ophthalmologists' demands were ignored by legislators. Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s ophthalmologists like Atilio Tiscornia (staff physician for several rail companies), Juan M. Vila Ortiz (oculist for the Department of Labor), and Jose A. Sena

⁴⁵ José A. Sena, "Algunas consideraciones médico-legales sobre lesiones oculares por accidentes del trabajo," *Archivos de Oftalmología de Buenos Aires* 10 (1935): 544-551.

(Department of Hygiene) published copious articles on the subject of ocular work accident regulation. The bulk of the work that they produced were case studies designed to highlight the complexity of ocular work accidents and the need for universal guidelines. However, through out the 1930s ophthalmologists began to develop more nuance in their perspective of the problems with work accident regulation. They rejected Weskamp's mathematical model in favor of what they called the "empirical model" of determining the severity of an injury and its subsequent indemnification. In doing so they began to discuss a new type of blindness.

When Weskamp wrote his thesis in 1916 he mentioned in passing the minimum threshold of sight for maintaining any work. He placed this as one tenth, or the percentage of sight necessary to perform most domestic tasks. By 1939, when the ideas and discussions of the decade coalesced into a new proposal to reform the 1915 work accident legislation, the issue of "work blindness" was fundamentally more important. In the legislative proposal produced by Atilio Tiscornia, Enrique Bertotto, and Juan Manuel Vila Ortiz they argued, "The specifics are so many and have so many nuances that to try to establish a formula for all cases is impossible and therefore, a certain elasticity should be established in law to facilitate the expert's job."⁴⁶ This looser understanding of the role of charts and calculations didn't prevent the ophthalmologists from proposing their use. They included a system of classification similar to Weskamp's to divide professions into categories in this case good, mediocre, poor, and null or minor. They added a gender component, noting women's professions versus men's professions. The majority of

⁴⁶ Tiscornia, Bertotto, and Ortiz, *Valorización de las incapacidades*, 42. *Los pertajes son tantos y se presentan con tal variedad de matices que pretender establecer una formula determinada para todos los casos es imposible, y se debe, por lo tanto, darle cierta elasticidad a las leyes en forma de facilitarle la tarea al perito.*

women's professions required only poor eyesight. None required mediocre sight, and only embroiderers, seamstresses, and lace makers required good eyesight. The fourth category of sight, null or minor, consisted of jobs for the blind and was not divided by gender. Here the ophthalmologists noted; manufactuerers of brushes, basketry, chair makers, masseuses, piano and organ tuners, and teachers of the blind.⁴⁷

The ophthalmologists' inclusion of blind occupations, and therefore blind workers, in their new proposal functioned in tandem with their understanding of "work blindness." They argued "For another thing, you should not wait for physiological blindness to establish the total incapacity to work. This is produced before and often much before, depending on the visual demands of the trade."⁴⁸ The fourth category described by the doctors reflected blind occupations not because they intended to include the blind in work accident legislation, but because by creating a minimum quantity of sight for all other types of work they were creating a category of men, who though they were not physiologically blind, could only realistically work within the field of blind occupations. Retraining in these fields meant working with the blind community and training in centers for the blind.

Ophthalmologists' forays into medical-legal questions of workers sight literally and figuratively created new categories and populations of blind workers. Many workers, especially those with one eye, lost their jobs as transportation drivers, and workers with weak sight were now subject to eye exams to ensure they met the minimal sight requirements to work in transportation. More importantly, ophthalmologists' work created

⁴⁷ Ibid., 50-51.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 46. *Por otra parte no debe esperarse a la llegada de la ceguera fisiológica para establecer la total incapacidad de trabajo. Esta se produce antes y se produce tanto antes, cuanto mayor sea la exigencia de la visión en su oficio.*

a category of disability that did not require complete blindness to become work blind. New anxieties were generated about the capacity of weak sighted children and adults to function in the sighted world. This was best exemplified by debates about schools for amblyopic children. In the 1920s and 1930s, ophthalmologists and educators began to debate the necessity of creating schools specifically for children with *ambliopía*, or weak sight. Amblyopic children tended to fair poorly in public school, but were seen as unfairly advantaged in schools for the blind. Ophthalmologists, including BAC president Augustine C. Rebuffo, argued that amblyopic children needed specialized training that should be separate from blind children. Despite significant support from the medical and educational communities, these specialized schools never materialized. As a result children with weak sight were frequently absorbed into programs for the blind, as were adults whose weak sight prohibited them from continuing in their original profession.

Ophthalmologists involvement in medical-legal and socio economic debates inadvertently flowed directly into the campaigns led by the political organizations for the blind by the blind produced during the 1920s and into the 1930s. This helped organizations for the blind build cases to the public for supporting their cause as one that reached across class lines and converted men made "useless" by the cruel realities of industry into useful working citizens once more. The BAC's focus on adult retraining programs and their insistence on equality for all people appealed to workers organizations on both ideological and practical basis. Prior to the 1920s, such retraining would have been impossible. The work of the BAC during the 1920s and 1930s and the expansion of training programs for the adult blind slowly reworked the conception of sight and occupation. As ophthalmologists honed the legal definitions of sight, they created the

idea that larger portions of the population than previously calculated may need the services offered by institutions like the BAC. With the exception of the Peramino section of the rail union La Fraternidad, the majority of the BAC's support came from workers circles such as: *Círculo de Obreros of Morón, Chacabuco* (Morón, Chacabuco Workers' Circle), *Círculo de Obreros de Palermo* (Palermo Workers' Circle), and the *Círculo de Obreros Río Cuarto* (Río Cuarto Workers' Circle). As sight was more and more circumscribed and workers more readily categorized as unfit to work, the programs offered by the BAC seemed to offer disabled workers the chance not to simply earn a living but to escape the derision ascribed to the idle poor. The BAC offered injured workers the opportunity to maintain dignified masculinity.

Conclusions

Just five years after forming the BAC had already reached international levels of recognition. In 1930, at the World Conference for Work for the Blind in New York a delegate from Mexico, Alejandro Meza from the *Asociación "Ignacio Trigueros* (The Ignacio Trigueros Association), described the work done by the BAC;

In addition, there is a more important press operated by the Argentine Library for the Blind of Buenos Aires. This institution is carrying out the production of Braille material on a large scale and, at the present time, the Library possesses a large number of literary works printed or transcribed by hand. These books circulated among the blind of the different Spanish-American countries. In addition, this institution publishes a monthly Braille periodical called *Hacia La Luz* which, in my opinion, is the best Braille magazine in Spanish at the present time.⁴⁹

In less than half a decade the BAC became one of the most influential organizations for the blind in Spanish speaking America.

⁴⁹ Helga Lende, Evelyn C. McKay, and Sherman C. Swift, eds., *Proceedings of the World Conference on Work* (New York: American Braille Press, 1931), 252.

The BAC's success derived from the ambiguous place that the blind occupied in discussions about the disabled and Argentine society. Immigrants of Jewish, Eastern European or Middle Eastern backgrounds threatened to create blindness through their degenerative susceptibility to trachoma. Ophthalmologists' fine delineation between blindness and heredity separated the blind from degenerative disabilities of greater concern to their colleagues, but it was an uneasy separation. Blind individuals from undesirable racial backgrounds or with multiple disabilities constantly threatened to shift discussions about the blind back toward the issue of degeneration. Consequentially, organizing on behalf of the blind became a constant battle to balance positive displays of blind intellectual capabilities and practical solutions to meet the needs of all blind peoples.

The BAC emerged during this moment as an organization capable of striking that balance. Its leadership, blind and sighted alike, were committed to an ideology of equality that lead them to accept into their programs blind individuals that could present problems for the image of the blind. One of the institutions founders, Vicenta Castro Cambón, for example, famously tutored a young girl with intellectual disabilities after the Instituto Nacional para Ciegos refused her entrance. The BAC was able to balance acceptance of blind individuals who threatened the fragile status of the blind as a harmless population because they focused their energy on making the BAC an important center for the production culture and art. As an artistic space controlled by the blind, the blind leadership turned the BAC into a place where the blind and sighted alike met and discussed on equal terms. From that space the BAC created a channel to the public that projected an image of blindness that was productive, intelligent, and cultured. In the

1930s, that image superseded any attempts to place the blind alongside other disabled populations that were increasingly scrutinized as unfit for society. As a result programs and projects for the blind flourished between 1930 and 1940.

Chapter Six

"Struggling in Search of Sunlight:" Gender, Labor, and the Diversification of Institutions for the Blind

Introduction

By the 1930s, the *Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos*' bid to garner support for the blind cause appeared to be a success. The library had national and international donors, volunteers, and partners that made dozens of new programs and projects for the blind possible. After a hiatus through most of the decade of the 1920s, the press rediscovered the blind as a worthy subject and dozens of newspapers and magazines began to follow the activities of the library and of the blind. The press supported the idea that blind organizations represented the best kind of humanitarian response in times of economic crisis. It was a community that appeared to be self-sufficient, with leaders developing programs to see to the needs of individuals within it.

In the 1930s Argentina was reeling from the effects of both the global economic crisis and the collapse of democratic institutions following the military coup, which deposed Hipólito Yrigoyen on September 6, 1930. State resources contracted at the same time that conservative nativist politicians gained power in government. Conservatives argued for national regeneration through the control or eradication of "foreign" elements. They defined patriotism as anti-communist, anti-labor and anti-immigration. The rise of these kinds of politics created a contradictory relationship between the blind community and these new powerful entities. On the one hand, the blind community saw to itself, and ensured the well being of their population without the necessity of government

intervention. This idea of the blind community as self-sufficient appealed to conservatives who wanted to decrease direct government provision of social services. On the other hand, blind leaders at the BAC and La Fraternal expressed overtly socialist positions and promoted an international vision of the blind community that transcended the nation. These contradictions also came to reflect internal divisions between blind leaders. As the visibility of the blind population grew, political variations created corresponding differences between blind leaders. Debates developed about how to define the problems affecting the blind in Argentina and how those problems should be resolved. By the 1930s, a host of new institutions appeared in and around Buenos Aires each reflecting different visions of what social services for the blind should be and why.

Rifts between blind leaders deepened as institutional projects to improve blind individuals' quality of life and economic fortunes continued to yield few results through the 1920s. As the years passed and the number of programs, schools, institutions, and projects for the blind increased, blind leadership expected to witness dramatic change in the fortune of blind individuals across the nation. This did not happen. Traditional workshop crafts for the blind, such as brush making, were profitable businesses for the blind in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but by the 1930s these industries were increasingly mechanized abroad and imported at much cheaper cost than hand-made crafts.¹ In the twentieth century, handicrafts were generally only profitable as items marketed as made by the blind and sold at a premium at specialty fairs and events. Even when they sold goods at higher prices than similar products, few blind individuals could secure enough to live independently without other sources of income. In Buenos Aires,

¹ For more information on the increase in imports to Argentina from Europe and the United States as a result of the Global Depression see, Tulio Halperin Donghi, *The Contemporary History of Latin America*, ed. and trans. John Charles Chasteen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 220-223.

trained and licensed graduates of training programs for the blind at the INC and BAC continued to find themselves indigent. The most viable occupation for the average blind porteño continued to be as a street vendor of cigarettes and candies, work that was often equated with mendicancy by the police and subject to harassment. The only work that afforded a stable middle-income livelihood for the blind was that of an employee of an institution for the blind.

In the 1920s the BAC confronted the problem of employment through aggressive propaganda campaigns, but by the 1930s it was clear that this would not be enough. In 1930, the BAC began to consider alternatives and settled on creating direct employment opportunities for the blind in factories built and run by the BAC. The first factory the opened in 1935 was a clothing production facility specifically designed to employ blind women, which reflected the BAC's commitment to equality between the sexes.² The factory and its *obreras ciegas* (blind women workers) were the first and only project during the entire period of study to directly address women as workers. According to the BAC they chose to open a factory for women workers so that could be, "in concert with their being, economically and morally free, capable of exercising their rights and fulfill their obligations as sighted women do."³ Though BAC never publically explained why it chose to open a factory for women as opposed to men first, their decision contradicted overall direction of development of new institutions and services in the 1930s. As the

² For a detailed discussion of socialism and equality in Argentina see, Asunción Lavrín, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, & Uruguay, 1890-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 261-265.

³ "Una Promesa en vías de realización," *Hacia La Luz* 7, no. 47 (December, 1934): 1. ...*en el concierto con los seres, económica y moralmente libres, capaces de ejercer sus derechos y cumplir sus obligaciones como lo hacen las mujeres que ven.*

number and direction of institutions expanded he explicitly put blind men at the center of their programs.

The first major division between blind leaders at the BAC occurred in 1930 when Maria C. Marchi left her role as secretary of the institution. Marchi was a devout Catholic and a close associate of Monseñor Dionisio R. Napal, an intense anti-communist, chaplain for the Armada Argentina and supporter of the Argentine nativist movement. After leaving the BAC, Marchi opened a new organization, the *Hogar para Ciegos "Vicenta Castro Cambón"* (The Vicenta Castro Cambón Home for the Blind, hereafter HCVCC). HCVCC was a home for blind men that provided housing, food, and basic vocational training in traditional blind crafts. It was designed to address the immediate needs of indigent blind men and placed little emphasis on structural social change. The BAC resisted institutions of this nature stating in their magazine *Hacia la Luz*, "If a blind beggar inspires compassion, the blind man who works provokes at first surprise, subsequently admiration, and later respect, thus this is the really exemplary view of those persons deprived of the most appreciated of the senses, that they accept their situation and they struggle, they struggle to live with the same economic and moral independence as their counterparts equipped with sight."⁴ The tension between meeting blind men's immediate needs and affecting social change was persistent, especially as the global economic crisis created even more difficult economic conditions for a population struggling to secure viable employment.

⁴ "Una Promesa en vías de realización," 1. *Si inspira compasión un ciego que mendiga, el ciego que trabajo provoca primero sorpresa, en seguida admiración, y más tarde respeto, pues es realmente ejemplar la vista de seres que privados del más apreciado de los sentidos aceptan su situación y luchan, luchan por vivir con la misma independencia económica y moral que sus semejantes dotados de visión.*

Differences between the BAC and the HCVCC reflected debates between blind leaders about the meaning of labor for the blind and its role in generating social change. At the core of these debates were ideas about dignified labor and gender. Despite the BAC's very prominent decision to open a factory for women, most discussions about labor revolved around the labor of blind men. For blind leaders at the BAC dignified labor paid enough to secure economic independence. For La Fraternal, it should do the same and it should reflect the amount of training conducted by the individual in preparation for the job. In 1918, La Fraternal critiqued the INC for providing years of training to blind children, only to prepare them to sell cigarettes in the street.⁵ By the 1930s, however, the BAC and La Fraternal were no longer the only organizations participating in the debate. In addition to Maria Marchi's more conservative perspective, Julio R Peralta, a graduate of the INC and agricultural engineer, insisted that blind men needed better access to physical labor in the outdoors. Physical outdoor labor was manlier and it helped blind men develop masculine characteristics. By the end of the decade, blind leaders ceased to have a monopoly over the discussion when a new institution for the blind developed through the traditional avenue of sighted elite philanthropy. This new organization approached labor question from the more traditional avenue of "blind crafts," and reasserted the more paternalistic approach to vocational training for the blind.

This chapter examines three institutions that were indicative of the growth of institutions for the blind during this period. These institutions, the HCVCC, Julio Peralta's institution the *Colonia Agrícola y Industrial para Ciegos*, (The Agricultural and Industrial Colony for the Blind, hereafter La Colonia) and the *Instituto e Asilo para Ciegos "Román Rosell"* (The Román Rosell Institute and Asylum for the Blind, hereafter

⁵ La Fraternal, "En el INC: El attitude indecisivo del gobierno."

Instituto Román Rosell) represented the different political, social and philosophical interpretations of the problems confronting the blind during this period. All three institutions examined here were created for men. The Instituto Román Rosell was explicitly for men only, while the HCVCC and La Colonia were ostensibly open to women but focused the bulk of their financial resources on men. Many blind leaders believed that the respectability and acceptance of the blind community hinged on the respectability of blind men. For some blind leaders, blind men begging in the street, being harassed by the police for selling their goods in the wrong place, or becoming sequestered in homes for the elderly while still in their prime all represented the humiliation and degradation of the community as a whole. In many ways organizations saw blind men as the public face of the community. The visibility of this class of blind men as a result of their time spent in the street, seemed to reinforce a powerful stereotype of blindness that blind leaders sought to counter in their propaganda.

Hogar para Ciegos "Vicenta Castro Cambón"

In 1928, BAC leader Vicenta Castro Cambón passed away after years of declining health. Cambón was quickly memorialized by her companions at the BAC as a symbol of the blind cause. Cambón's self abnegation and her devotion to serving the blind was a rallying point for blind leadership. Year after year the BAC marked the anniversary of her death with special care. Her close friend and co-founder at the BAC, Maria C. Marchi, went even further to memorialize her friend. Three years after Cambón's death,

Marchi retired from the BAC and founded the Hogar para Ciegos "Vicenta Castro Cambón."⁶

Marchi's new project departed significantly from the ideologies and rhetoric espoused by the BAC in their publications and presentation in the press. If the BAC was ideologically and rhetorically linked to the socialists then Marchi's new organization was equally linked to liberalism and to nativist conservatives. From its inception the BAC emphasized the importance of developing an international network of blind leaders and many of its services extended beyond the borders of the Argentine nation. The HCVCC in contrast promoted their project as a patriotic endeavor to aid only the blind of Argentina. The HCVCC's overtly patriotic message was abundantly evident in their monthly magazine, *Los Ciegos* (The Blind). Like the BAC's *Hacia la Luz*, *Los Ciegos* was designed for the sighted community, but unlike *Hacia la Luz* its editors did not attempt to sell subscriptions to the publication outside of Argentina. *Los Ciegos* also attempted to replicate *Hacia la Luz*'s practice of publishing both sighted and blind literary productions, but HCVCC's publication drew more exclusively from traditional literary sectors. Articles paid homage to Argentina's liberal past. Poetry contributions like, "Una patria" by B. González Arrilli or "Patria," by Arturo Capdevila, glorified the Argentine nation. Short stories, such as a reprinting of Ricardo del Campo's "El remanso," were drawn from the heroic gaucho literary tradition. The literary selections in *Los Ciegos* would have appealed to conservative nativists who wanted to return Argentina to an imagined past in which Argentine culture was not threatened by foreign

⁶ Juana Mac Mahon de Kubke, *Biblioteca, "Vicenta Castro Cambón,"* (Buenos Aires: Consejo Nacional de Educación, 1936), Biblioteca Digital de la Biblioteca Nacional del Maestro, <http://www.bnm.me.gov.ar/catalogo/Record/000146611> (accessed 07/11/2012), 44-51.

influences. The magazine urged subscribers to donate to the HCVCC stating, "To contribute to the sustenance of the Home is to do social, patriotic and Christian work."⁷

Amidst the overtly nationalist rhetoric in *Los Ciegos* were subtle stabs at immigrants. The section of the magazine title "En Broma" often contained jokes drawing on immigrant stereotypes. Most jokes gently poked fun at the regional differences between Spanish or Italian immigrants. Some were more telling. One joke went, "They say many hungry people immigrate from Russia,--Where do they go?--The Sandwich Islands."⁸ The supposed poverty of Russian immigrants to the country was a significant source of critique in nativist circles that wanted more restrictions on immigration. More telling than the few jokes directed towards different nationalities was the institution's homage in May of 1934 to Dr. Angel Gallardo, on the occasion of his death. Gallardo was a prominent scientist and founder of the ultra-right Liga Patriótica Argentina, who openly expressed his admiration for Benito Mussolini.⁹ The home's links to Gallardo ran through their religious patron and fellow anti-communist, Monseñor Dionisio Napal. Monseñor Napal was a close associate of Maria Marchi and was a frequent guest lecturer at HCVCC events and radio broadcasts. Though there was no indication of vitriol or intense anti-immigrant sentiment in *Los Ciegos*, the links between the organization and the Argentine right was antithetical to the BAC's internationalist and socialist platform.

In the first half of the 1930s, while the BAC campaigned and fundraised in order to secure the required funding to open their factory for blind women workers, the

⁷ "Advertisement," *Los Ciegos* 1, no. 4 (August, 1931): 56. *Contribuir al sustentamiento del Hogar es hacer obra social, patriótica, y Cristián.*

⁸ "En Broma..." *Los Ciegos* 1, no. 1 (May, 1931): 51. *Dicen que muchos hambrientos emigran de Rusia, -- ¿Y a donde van?--A las islas de Sandwhich?*

⁹ "En el Hogar para Ciegos Vicenta Castro Cambón rindióse un homenaje a la memoria de Dr. Angel Gallardo," *El Pueblo*, May 19, 1934, Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, Crónica 1934-1937.

HCVCC articulated much more traditional interpretation of gender roles. Within *Los Ciegos*, HCVCC the type of articles written by contributors was strictly delineated between the genders. With the exception of a handful of articles written by Maria C. Marchi, men wrote all the patriotic or historical pieces. Women contributed religious or Romantic poetry to the magazine with titles like, "Piedad" or "Tu lo sabes, Señor." Though the magazine reproduced the gendered binary of women in the home and men as workers, they encouraged women's intellectual production as long as it was directed toward appropriately feminine subjects. Women's subjects, however, were always reserved for the later half of the magazine. The first half was reserved for the political, historical, patriotic, and informative pieces written by men. The second section of the magazine targeted a female audience and included sections on fashion, portraits of society ladies, images of babies, recipes, sewing patterns for children's clothes, and religious poetry. Beauty and fashion articles accompanied these regular sections. In one article the author writes a treatise on women's hair as a symbol of womanhood and laments the new fashion for bobs. The sighted women targeted by *Los Ciegos* were unquestionably domestic, and represented an ideal for blind women in the future. Standing section for men like the "Valores Argentinos" section or the joke section often reinforced male authority. One joke went, "Interrogation--When you hit your wife were you under the influence of alcohol?--No, judge, I was leaving the bed."¹⁰

Behind the familiar delineations between genders within sections of *Los Ciegos* targeted to a sighted audience, were very deep concerns about gender within the blind

¹⁰ "En Bromas," *Los Ciegos* 1, no. 2 (June-July, 1931): 54. *Interrogatorio--Cuando su mujer le pegó ¿estaba usted bajo la influencia del alcohol? --No, señor juez; estaba dejado de la cama.*

community. None of the female blind leaders were married and none had children.¹¹ Women who became blind later in life while married to sighted men were vulnerable to abandonment. If they were lucky they could rely on their children for support, but often care for blind family members fell to female children. The fact many blind women did not marry or have children meant that they could not access higher male wages. Blind women without children tended to rely on family members older than themselves for support. As those family members passed, blind women had few choices. They could try to earn enough through work, which primarily meant selling clothing they knitted or sewed, or institutional assistance. Despite these issues, blind organizations never addressed a "problem" of blind motherhood. The BAC addressed women as workers, Bartolomé Ayrolo discussed them as students, and Dionisio R. Napal discussed their spirituality, but no organization mentioned blind women as wives or mothers. The only organization created exclusively for women was *Las Hermanas Sacramentinas no videntes*, an order of nuns established in 1927.

The idea that blind women were not fit as wives and mothers was ingrained in the silences regarding blind women and domesticity. *Los Ciegos* was one of the first to even mildly address blind women as wives and mothers. The first two covers of "*Los Ciegos*" portrayed a young blind woman spinning yarn while a young sighted male child played with a toy at her feet. This image of blind female domesticity was as revolutionary it was traditional.¹² This unique image conveyed to the reader the capacity of the blind woman

¹¹ I encountered only one married blind women living with her spouse in any document between 1890 and 1940.

¹² Catherine Kudlick, "The outlook of *The Problem* and the problem with the *Outlook*: Two Advocacy Journals Reinvent Blind People in Turn-of-the-Century America," *The New History of Disability: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 187-213.

to be solely responsible for both a domestic task and childrearing. It also assured the reader that blind women would produce sighted independent children. Beyond this image the organization referenced women through discussion of the blind family. Blind women appeared in HCVCC propaganda as silent additions to discussions about the health and well being of blind families. Because HCVCC promoted domesticity as the ideal for sighted women through their magazine, the organization seemed to suggest that blind women would not be fulfilled as long as they remained excised from the formation of nuclear family. At the heart of that family was the blind male, which reflected the trope that only blind men would marry blind women. For Marchi, the strength and future of the blind community lie in the creation of financially stable blind families. Such families were only possible if blind male labor became respected and accepted.

In contrast to the situation of blind female leaders, most of the blind male leaders were married with children, but most of their wives were sighted. The fact that blind men were more likely to marry and constitute families placed the onus of improving blind families on men. To stabilize blind families the HCVCC emphasized projects that promised to convert blind men into laborers. Initially, HCVCC insisted that it was crucial to find men work that could fulfill more than simple financial need. The male worker needed respectable, dignified employment in order to fulfill his masculine role in the family. As one advertisement created by HCVCC reads:

Fathers; Sons; Brothers; Friends; Men! All those who know a blind man, have an unavoidable duty to put them in contact with the "Home for the Blind," that will prepared them for **life's struggles**. Teaching them to read and write; Indicating ways to be useful to themselves and their loved ones; Providing solace and entertainment. DIGNIFYING THEM the actions of the "Home for the Blind" will reach anywhere in the Republic.¹³

¹³ "Advertisement," *Los Ciegos* 1, no. 3 (August 1931): 4. *Padres; Hijos; Hermanos; Amigos; ¡Hombres! Todo aquel que conozca a un ciego, tiene el deber ineludible de ponerlo en conocimiento del "Hogar para*

Men who could not find work or who had to rely on family for subsistence, contributors to *Los Ciegos* argued, were not dignified and needed intervention to regain social respectability. The home for men proposed by HCVCC would, therefore, serve as a half-way-house for blind men. Men who were unable to earn an independent livelihood could utilize the HCVCC resources while they were trained in an occupation. Once trained, they could become dignified men and useful to "themselves and their loved ones."¹⁴

Few of the blind organizations run by blind leadership took issue with the HCVCC's call for dignified employment for men. The organization's project outline fit well with other programs for men created by blind leaders, though the HCVCC placed greater emphasis on men as heads of household. Issues arose, however, when the organization actually began to operate its home for blind men. The home was initially destined for blind adult men who found themselves unable to acquire work. The HCVCC even projected that it would one day open a farm colony where blind families could establish residence and work the land.¹⁵ The few of the men who became residents at the home did so at the behest of other institutional authorities. The home for men became a place for blind men who were moved from hospitals and other public asylums. Because the home quickly shifted from halfway house to permanent residence it could not initially fulfill its promise to find men employment. As a permanent residence, the home for men became an example to some blind organizations like La Fraternal of the worst kind of

*ciegos" que lo habilitará para **La lucha por la vida** Enseñándole a leer y escribir; Indicándole la forma de ser útil, a sí y a los suyos; Proporcionándole solaz y entretenimiento. DIGNIFICÁNDOLO A cualquier parte de la República alcanzará la acción del "Hogar para Ciegos."* [sic]

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hogar para Ciegos "Vicenta Castro Cambón," *Informe y Balance General Al 31 de Marzo 1933* (Buenos Aires: 1933), 5.

social service for the blind. In similar vein to the BAC's critique of the direct provision of personal needs, La Fraternal argued publically that the HCVCC tarnished blind men's dignity.

La Fraternal's critiques stemmed from their argument that HCVCC's practices infantilized the blind men living at the home. For administrators at the HCVCC, blindness created a space between adolescence and disgraced masculine adulthood. Men arrived at the HCVCC because they could not fulfill the proscriptions of dignified masculine labor. The administrators at HCVCC viewed the men as in need of guidance and care as a result of their inability to secure the proper employment. The care provided by the HCVCC was conducted predominately by women from the middle and upper classes who volunteered their time as part of their charitable endeavors. Only two women were paid for their labors and both lived in the home itself. Both women were figures of authority. Maria C. Marchi was the president and the other woman was the Braille teacher at the home. Female copyists produced books for the home, female teachers taught all of the Braille classes, and women also conducted most of the home's outreach programs to hospitals.

The fact that charitable female labor conducted most of the work at the HCVCC was an important component for understanding La Fraternal's discomfort with operations at the HCVCC. As discussed in chapter one, the purpose of charity was not necessarily to radically alter the social status of recipients, but rather to ameliorate immediate needs created by their circumstances. Charity operated on the presumption that those providing services did so from at minimum a superior socio-economic position than those receiving those services. In Argentina, women from socio-economic elite backgrounds who

participated in organizations designed to provide social services used and allowed male professionals to use discourses about maternalism to explain women's positions as administrators or functionaries in social organizations in Argentina. Though these women often functioned as equals within these spheres, the persistence of the idea of charity work was an expression of women's innate maternal instincts existed and was espoused by observers of these institutions. Elite female volunteers in an organization like HCVCC would likely have indicated to an organization like La Fraternal a maternalistic arrangement of authority that demeaned blind adult males by subordinating them to that maternal female authority.¹⁶

Public press furthered the impression that residents at the home for men were passive recipients of female care through headlines such as, "The blind at the Hogar para Ciegos Vicenta Castro Cambón were gifted with a festival by the female employees in the Accounting section of the National Highways Department."¹⁷ The only men associated with the Home were those who gave lectures designed to promote HCVCC during the organization's set radio spots. The association with maternal care was deepened by the fact that the home served as *tutela* for children from the provinces seeking to study at the *Instituto Nacional para Ciegos*. Tutelas had parental authority when parents were out of reach and provided homes for children during school vacations

¹⁶ Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change*; Guy, *Women Build the Welfare State*; Marcela M. A. Nari, *Políticas De Maternidad Y Maternalismo Político: Buenos Aires, 1890-1940* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2004); Karen Mead, "Gender, Welfare and the Catholic Church in Argentina: Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paúl, 1890-1916," *The Americas* 58, no. 1 (July 2001): 91-119; and Karen Mead, "Gendering the Obstacles to Progress."

¹⁷ "Los ciegos del Hogar para Ciegos Vicenta Castro Cambón fueron regalados con un festival por las empleadas de la seccion Contabilidad, de la Direccion Nacional de Vialidad," *El Mundo*, July 10, 1936, Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, Crónica 1934-1937. *Los ciegos del Hogar para Ciegos Vicenta Castro Cambón fueron regalados con un festival por las empleadas de la sección Contabilidad, de la Dirección Nacional de Vialidad.*

and breaks too short for students to return to their own homes. The HCVCC's literal parental authority over some children was figuratively reflected in the home's attitude toward male residents. One journalist describing Maria Marchi's place as the president referred to her as the "alma mater" of the home.¹⁸

The public confrontation between La Fraternal and the HCVCC's practices began when the home adopted new modes of raising funds. Within a year of opening the new project found that it had serious financial problems. To their economic woes the HCVCC began fundraising drives like many organizations before them. However, the mechanism employed by HCVCC to raise money was to mimic the practices of blind mendigos. During the annual "Semana de la Hogar para Ciegos 'Vicenta Castro Cambón,'" sighted female associates, some dressed in fur coats, stood on Buenos Aires Street corners with baskets or jars and asked for donations from passing porteños.¹⁹ In other cases the organization posted advertisements in the newspaper asking the public for money. When thirty-two-year-old Rodolfo Quinteros Ramos, resident at the *Asilo de Ancianos y Inválidos* (Asylum for Invalids and the Elderly), asked the organization for a space in their facility the HCVCC posted a newspaper advertisement stating, "this poor blind man needs passage."²⁰ For La Fraternal, the fundraising week and public requests for money was the final and most egregious example of the harm to blind men committed by the HCVCC. In public statement in the press their secretary wrote, "that the Argentine blind repudiate raffles and collections and demand work and study as effective means to reach

¹⁸ "Tiende a Aliviar la T. remenda desgracia de la ciegos el 'Hogar Vicencta C. Cambón,'" *Ultima Hora*, July 18, 1934, Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, Crónica 1934-1937.

¹⁹ "Colecta Pro Hogar de Ciegos 'Vicenta Castro Cambón,'" *El Mundo*, June 6, 1934, Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, Crónica 1934-1937.

²⁰ "Este pobre ciego necesita un pasaje," *n.p.*, n.d. Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, Crónica 1934-1937.

a dignified personality and an economic development more in harmony with the culture and progress of our country."²¹

The accusations leveled at Marchi's organization ignored the fact that the home did provide some chance for men at the home to learn a skill. In response to La Fraternal's critiques the organization stated that they, "provide them [the blind] a proper education to earn a living, helping to destroy the inveterate formula of the idea that the blind are always associated with the beggar and his guide asking for alms."²² The reality for most blind men, however, was that training and education only translated into meaningful work in a handful of cases. For most blind men the only viable occupation was selling cigarettes. Rather than work against this trend the HCVCC decided to focus the bulk of its energy regarding the job market for the blind to making the sale of cigarettes a viable, legal, and respectable occupation. They helped men acquire licenses to sell cigarettes, lobbied for special rules that allowed blind men to acquire licenses easier, and helped men find and secure legal areas to sell their wares. Their efforts were supported by press anecdotes that described the successful lives led by blind men in the business. One article defended Antonio Spinelli, a blind cigarette vendor, when electoral officials in his area turned him away because he was blind. The newspaper *Crítica* lamented, "Spinelli se encuentra privado de la vista, lo cual no obsta, por cierto, para que trabaje y contribuya en forma apreciable, a subvenir a las necesidades de una larga

²¹ "Desautoriza una colecta la Soc. de Ciegos," *Tribuna Mitre*, April 5, 1935, Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, Crónica 1934-1937. ...*que los ciegos argentinos repudian las rifas y colectas y reclaman el trabajo y el estudio como medios mas eficaces para lograr una personalidad digna y un desenvolvimiento economico mas en armonia con la cultura y el progreso del pais.*

²² "Una Colecta para los ciegos: Lo que se persigue con ella," *El Diario*, April 5, 1935, Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, Crónica 1934-1937. ...*les facilite un aprendizaje adecuado para ganarse la vida, contribuyendo a destruir la formula inveterada según la cual la idea del ciego va siempre asociada a la del mendigo con el lazarillo pidiendo limosna.*

familia, de la que Spinelli forma parte." Spinelli was a respectable citizen with rights because he could claim a dignified masculine place within his large family through his labors at a cigarette stand. This was ultimately the goal of the HCVCC's operations and they were willing to accept any means that it could be achieved and achieved quickly. If the public could accept blind men in the role of cigarette vendors the HCVCC was willing to place the bulk of their energy in that direction.

The Colonia Agrícola e Industrial para Ciegos

The notes of maternalism in HCVCC operations, and the fact that the organization seemed to model negative stereotypes of blindness back to the public, created significant contention among blind organizations run by blind leaders. Few organizations, however, could confidently claim that their approach generated more significant change. What followed were increased competition and the creation of overlapping and redundant programs for the blind in the city of Buenos Aires. In 1935 the director of the Colonia Agrícola e Industrial para Ciegos, Julio Peralta, observed the progress of the existing institutions, noting that: "They resemble plants in nursery that waging a pointless struggle in search of sunlight, are doomed to succumb to the sterility of the effort."²³ Despite nearly a decade of debate and experimentation, the institutions in Buenos Aires had done little to diminish the percentage of the blind population living in abject poverty.²⁴ Not only were there still thousands of destitute blind living in Buenos Aires, but also there

²³ Julio R. Peralta, *Proyecto de la Colonia Agrícola Industrial para ciegos* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Briozza Hnos., 1935), 4. *Estas se asemejan a la plantas en almácigo que liberando una lucha inútil en procura de la luz solar, están condenadas a sucumbir por esterilidad del esfuerzo.*

were almost no resources for those in the interior of the country. Julio R. Peralta suggested that he, unlike all the others, had a better idea.

For a brief period in the 1920s, Julio R. Peralta was well known in the world of the blind. He was one of the first blind Argentines to attend and graduate from a university with a degree. His experiences as a blind man in the city gave him a perspective with which to view the lives of blind men living in rural conditions in the provinces. He stated of the differences between the urban and rural blind, "They [the urban blind] seem more or less correct, they speak and walk with the airs of educated people, but what a painful impression you receive if you closely observe the blind that live in the interior of the country, it seems that there their defects increase, and that we are in the presence of despicable beings; or to say against a human flood."²⁵ He asserts that the rural blind are not to blame for their despicable state.

Therefore, many times the state of abandonment in which the blind exist is not the result of ineptitudes or other organic faults of character specific or hereditary that tenaciously prevent an individual regeneration, but rather the logical consequence of the irritating negligence of the wealthy classes or better the disinterest of governments; but importantly for our case is the knowledge that this badness exists and that we should remedy it.²⁶

His proposal to remedy the situation was to create the *Colonia Agrícola e Industrial para Ciegos* (Agricultural and Industrial Colony for the Blind, hereafter La Colonia.)

²⁵ Julio Peralta, *Acción Tiflológica Argentina: Colonia Agrícola Industrial para Ciegos* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Briozzo Hnos., 1936), 4. ...visten con más o menos corrección, hablan y andan con aires de personas educadas, per cuán distinto y que impresión dolorosa se recibe si se observa de cerca a los ciegos que viven en el interior del país, parece que allí recrudescieran las taras, y que estuviésemos en presencia de seres despreciables; es decir frente a un aluvión humano

²⁶ Ibid. Pues muchas veces el estado de abandono en que se hallan los ciegos no es la resultante de ineptitudes u otras fallas orgánicas de carácter específico o hereditario que se opongan tenazmente a una regeneración del individuo, sino que es lógica consecuencia de la negligencia irritante de las clases adineradas o bien de la despreocupación de los gobiernos; pero lo importante para nuestro caso es saber que el mal existe y que debemos remediarlo.

The opening pages of the 1934 proposal for the La Colonia stand in stark contrast to similar proposals from other blind institutions. Rather than try to instill in the reader sympathy for the group he championed, Peralta used harsh pejoratives to describe the situation of the blind in Argentina. Unlike other blind leaders who tended to focus on the social problems facing the blind, Peralta used terms like "deadweights" or "parasites" to describe blind men who relied on charity or *limnosas* for their survival.²⁷ His writings convey his disgust with the conditions under which he believed the majority of the blind in his country lived and he tried to convey that disgust to his readers. While he blamed the situation of the blind on society as a whole, he reserved specific judgment for the institutions for the blind in the Federal Capital. He claimed that infighting between the BAC, HCVCC, and La Fraternal made them useless aids for the blind adults they were meant to serve. Additionally, though the INC provided a decent education to children, they offered no support to them once they left, rendering their education useless. He proposed that only the all-encompassing space of the colony resolved these issues. "[The colony] justly remedies the deficiencies mentioned, repairs losses, unifies the action, and collaborates at a the higher level that corresponds to the school and to the home, with the early work of the cited institutions."²⁸

In some ways the Colonia Agrícola was different from the other organizations in operation. Rather than train the blind in "traditional" blind labor, the school was designed to provide a comprehensive theoretical and practical education in mainstream

²⁷ Peralta, *Proyecto de la Colonia*, 1 and 4; Julio Peralta, *Acción tifológica Argentina: Colonia Agrícola e Industrial para Ciegos* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos Briozzo Hnos., 1935); and Julio Peralta, *Colonia Agrícola e Industrial para Ciegos* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos Briozzo Hnos., 1939).

²⁸ Peralta, *Proyecto de la Colonia*, 2. *...que subsana justamente las deficiencias apuntadas, repara la pérdidas, unifica la acción y colabora en el nivel superior que le corresponde como escuela y como hogar, con la labor incipiente de las instituciones citadas.*

agricultural sciences.²⁹ Peralta believed that the blind could fill the gap left by immigrants in Argentina's turn-of-the-century plan for development. Colonies for the blind would occupy the land deserted by Jewish, Italian, German, and Spanish immigrant colonies and make it productive. In Peralta's estimation it combined the best practices of blind education with the Argentine tradition of the colony as a way to make rural spaces productive. The only exception was that the colony's most important attribute was not converting barren land into productive space, but "useless" men into productive laborers. To emphasize the revolutionizing potential of the colony he referenced post-war Europe and implied that projects mirroring those for blind soldiers would prepare Argentina for a national reconstruction.

Though Peralta believed the blind could be trained as laborers he recognized that potential sighted employers, bankers, and officials would be more difficult to convince. Peralta constructed a demanding four-year curriculum of study in agricultural sciences and liberal arts in an effort to gain acceptance for his students' skills in the sighted world. In their agricultural studies, students spent half the day in the classroom studying soil science, meteorology, animal husbandry, biology and chemistry. The other half of the day was spent on practical labor where they planted seeds, weeded beds, raised rabbits, pigs, chickens, and so on. The school also invented new devices to aid students in farm tasks. A mechanism that helped the blind pick fruit from the trees frequently impressed visitors to the colony. According to Peralta, students were encouraged to innovate in order to improve their ability to perform tasks. The colony accepted children between the ages of eight and eighteen into a primary school section, but adults between the ages of nine and

²⁹ Peralta, *Accion Tiflológica Argentina*, 6-8.

forty began with agricultural sciences. In other words, children who entered the school would have an educational experience that closely mirrored a primary school through an agricultural sciences university trajectory.³⁰

The plan of study mirrored agricultural training programs designed to create scientific farmers who owned and ran their own farmsteads. However, Peralta never promoted his students as independent agriculturalists. The colony was intended to convert unused agricultural space into productive land as a cohesive unit. In most literature regarding the school, authors were careful to note that much of the infrastructure of the colony was put in place by sighted laborers and certain mechanical tasks were conducted by the sighted. For individual blind residents, the colony's intensive four-year regime was designed to secure them positions as menial laborers on large farms operated by sighted owners. Julio Peralta's hope was that the extent of their training and depth of their knowledge would, in the eyes of potential employers, outweigh their lack of sight in hiring decisions. He appealed to agriculturalists, farmers, and industrialists stating "they are the undisputed strong arms, with command decisions and intelligent action we march in the vanguard of their strength, because our school conveniently prepares workers who reclaim their spent energy, which is vigorously and silently renewed in the groove of the anvil and the harvest of the grain."³¹ Peralta was aware that he needed to potential employers to accept the project or it would not work. Thus, propaganda emphasized the extensive training received by the students, but

³⁰ Peralta, *Acción tiflógica Argentina*, 11-17.

³¹ Ibid., 10. *...son indiscuti [sic] con brazos fuerte, con decisión de comando y con inteligente acción marchamos a la vanguardia de sus esfuerzos, porque nuestra escuela prepara convenientemente los obreros que reclama la energía que se gasta, que se renueva vigorosa y silenciosamente en el surco en el yunque y en las cosechas granas.*

suggested to potential employers that their skills could be used to pick fruit, tend small animals, and to assist during planting.

Overtraining the blind for menial tasks was a tool with a long history as a way to convince the sighted public of the viability of blind employees. Like musical performances and poetry readings it was another way to prove to the sighted population the intellectual capacity of the blind. It was also exemplary of the many ways that Peralta and his organization continued to utilize strategies already in use to aid the blind. Like the other organizations for the blind, Peralta claimed that his institution would be better at obtaining actual jobs for residents, as opposed to simply training them. Like other organizations for the blind, Peralta's central mechanism for doing this was to generate propaganda about the capabilities of the blind in the press. Peralta and other blind leaders like him trusted that, once informed of colony's training program and the students' skills, employers would begin to hire students for specific jobs on their farms and ranches. Peralta claimed that his organization would actively create jobs for the blind through direct agreement with potential employers and legislative protections. Like the BAC that made similar claims, Peralta found that this was much more difficult than he anticipated.³²

All Peralta's goals for the institution were contingent on students' acquisition of economic stability. Peralta's stated goals for the students were that he wanted them to

Gain the skills necessary to earn good living, to develop a manly character, to have confidence in themselves, to conquer their economic situations in order to secure a certain amount of independence of living

³² Ibid., 37-42.

and to form estimable and dignified work habits that will aid them in the formation of a home.³³

In Peralta's statement, gender and financial security were two halves of the same set of principles. Just as in the case at the HCVCC, Peralta equated economic stability with manliness and family formation. In contrast to the HCVCC, Peralta was committed to a rigid definition of what constituted dignified masculine labor. Physically demanding labor, such as agricultural work, was the apex of masculine labor. The blind had traditionally been excluded from forms of work that demanded strong, well-trained bodies that spent extensive periods outdoors. Peralta proposed that his institution would recover blind men's masculinity, by training them in this field. By doing so, blind men would become more fully men than institutions in the city could affect.

The formation of masculine blind men was more attractive to sighted visitors and associates of the Colonia Agrícola than the project to provide men with employment in the agricultural sector. Visitors and even some board members wrote about the colony as therapy in the tradition of the asylum rather than as a school for economic advancement. In the case of the La Colonia, the therapy that the men received was to rehabilitate them as men. Sighted observers at the La Colonia did not emphasize the potential of the institution to help the blind acquire work or form family, as did Peralta. Rather they focused on the ability of the project to strengthen blind men's characters and bodies in a way that mimicked those of sighted men. They praised the residents' success in the context of their emotional well-being, which improved as their bodies more closely

³³ Peralta, *Proyecto de la Colonia*, 2. ...adquirir excepcionales condiciones de lucha, formarse un carácter varonil, tener confianza en sí mismo, conquistar una situación económica que les asegure una cierta independencia de vida finalmente una conducta basada en hábitos de trabajo, que les vuelve estimables y dignos de la formación de un hogar.

approximated those of the sighted male worker. For sighted observers, the benefit of physical strength gave the blind confidence and therefore emotional stability.

When commenting on the students, authors of articles often noted that they were smiling, ruddy cheeked, and well muscled. In an article for La Colonia's magazine *Acción Social* (Social Action), Raúl A. Entraigas describes such an individual. "There is a little blind man who lived for seven years seated in the door of a *conventillo*. He became paralyzed. They handed him to Mr. Peralta. Now he walks upright like a soldier and works the land under the sun's rays in the aura of La Pampa: now he is another."³⁴ Key to Entraigas's description of the student's transformation was his move from the city to the rural space. Observers at the La Colonia repeatedly compared their experiences visiting institutions for the blind in the city to the residents at the colony. They commented that in the city the internees were often pale, melancholic, and they needed a guide to go outdoors.³⁵ For Entraigas's the pampas itself was a revitalizing force that altered the fundamental being of La Colonia residents. The sun transformed their skin, giving them the appearance of truly masculine laborers rather than the pale pallor of urban intellectuals.

As important as change to their physical appearance was for observers, it was the fact that the blind moved without assistance about the facilities that continually

³⁴ Raúl A. Entraigas, "Una escuela agrícola para ciegos," *Accion Social: Revista mensual ilustrada organo oficial de la Colonia Agrícola e Industrial para Ciegos* 1, no. 2 (June, 1939): 14. *Hay un cieguito que vivió siete años sentrado a la puerta de un conventillo. Llegó a anquilosarse. Se lo entregaron después al señor Peralta. Ahora camina erguido como un militar y trabaja la tierra bajo los rayos del sol y acariciado por las auras de la pampa: ahora es otro.*

³⁵ See, Rebecca Ellis, "Making Useful Men: The Román Rosell Institute for the Blind," presented at the Rocky Mountain Council for Latin American Studies Conference, Santa Fe, NM (March 2011); and Matthew B. Karush, *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920-1946* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 89-90. The pale, lethargic, melancholic temperament of the blind was a trope that developed first in melodramatic theater productions and was then reified by the burgeoning field of psychiatry in the early twentieth century.

stimulated awe. Again, visitors often compared life at the colony with the supposedly sedentary life of the blind in the cities. These observations belied the fact that most of the educated and trained blind in Buenos Aires were adept at moving about the city, a fact Peralta noted in his commentary on the differences between the urban blind versus the rural. By the 1930s, urban mobility had become more difficult as traffic increased without corresponding protections for pedestrians. Several articles between 1934 and 1939 noted the occasional death of a blind man or women resulting from a traffic accident during this period. The increased difficulty of movement in the cities led many urban blind to adopt the newly introduced *bastón blanca*, or white cane.³⁶ The cane may have aided urban blind navigate the city more readily, but it also marked them as different. Observers at the La Colonia, marveled at the way that the students moved around the colony completely unaided. Entraiga equated this unaided mobility with that of a soldier, highlighting association between independent movement and masculine control of the body. Male physicality was increasingly promoted by the military, school systems and public health organizations as the best way for men to remain healthy productive citizens.³⁷ The La Colonia seemed to provide a way for blind men to participate gain control over the environment that surrounded them and manipulate it through physical labor.

Though a considerable amount of space in articles written by visitors to the school was devoted to emotional and physical well being of the students, authors of these

³⁶ Carlos P. Moroni, *Cosas de Ciegos, para leer en un rato*, prologue by María Josefina Rosasco (Buenos Aires: unknown, 1996), 124-125. The white cane was introduced in Argentina in 1931. There are some indications that the white cane was readily adopted in Argentina because similar mobility aids were already in use by some within the blind community.

³⁷ For Argentina see, Armus, *The Ailing City*; and Di Liscia, *Higienismo, educación, y discurso*. For Brazil see, Peter Beattie, *The Tribute of Blood: Army, Honor, Race, and Nation in Brazil, 1864-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

articles often did include a few comments regarding the work life of students. Specifically, articles written by sighted observers for newspapers and for La Colonia's own magazine, commented about the students' ability to plant seeds in a straight line. Some authors included a phrase or two that emphasized that students did this "nearly" as well as sighted workers.³⁸ Though residents could achieve physical appearances and emotional well being equal to their sighted counterparts, observers rarely made the same remarks about the work that they performed. Their observations of the students at work closely resembled those discussed in the academic literature regarding freak shows.³⁹ The students appeared to be accomplishing extraordinary acts that resembled, but did not match, those accomplished by a "normal" worker. Like the "armless wonder" pouring a cup of tea, observers noted the students' ability to identify plants by touch or sow a straight line of seeds. They were captivated by the students' seemingly extraordinary ability to mimic the sighted worker more than they noted their potential as workers. Thus, the articles that Peralta viewed so useful to promoting his students as potential laborers for hire potentially had the opposite effect. Instead, they emphasized the Colony as a therapeutic retreat where a healthy and happy lifestyle helped the students accomplish the extraordinary.

The Colonia Agrícola e Industrial para Ciegos seems to have led a relatively short life. In my research through the archives and newspapers the colony seems to disappear after 1942. Operations may have continued on some scale, but at the very least the Colonia no longer had the resources to continue publishing its own magazine, nor did it

³⁸ Entraigas, "Una escuela agrícola para ciegos;" and "La Verdadera Orientación Profesional del Ciego" *Accion Social: Revista Mensual Ilustrada Organo Oficial de la Colonia Agrícola e Industrial para Ciegos* 1, no. 3 (July, 1939): 4-6.

³⁹ For an excellent compilation of some of this literature see, Thomson, *Freakery*.

garner the interest of the popular press. In a letter to the Minister of Agriculture, a consul for the United States inquired about the success of the colony as he felt it might be a useful project to import to the U.S. The Minister replied that the colony was a failure and that it had very little success in placing any students in gainful employ on working ranches. Instead it was simply a glorified asylum, which was actually less successful than some as it still required the use of large numbers of hired sighted laborers to operate successfully.

Instituto e Asilo "Román Rosell"

The La Colonia began operations just a year prior to the opening of yet another institution for the blind in Buenos Aires. In contrast to any of the other organizations for the blind discussed in this chapter, this new institution was developed entirely separate from the blind community in the city. Instead the Instituto e Asilo "Román Rosell" was the product of a tradition of charitable institution formation reminiscent of the nineteenth century. Its organization and operation reflected the tradition of financially elite female authority over the health and education of lower class individuals, traditionally lower class women and children. However, like the institutions discussed above, Instituto Román Rosell was an exclusively male institution. As in the case of the HCVCC, gender within the institute was definitively linked to the dependency of residents on female authority figures. Unlike the HCVCC, the Instituto Román Rosell never expressed any desire to rescue the masculinity of their residents from a state of indignity. For authority figures at the institute, blind male residents were perpetually dependent and therefore not equipped to achieve the kind of independence associated with masculine adulthood. The

primary goal of the institute, therefore, was to train give their residents enough skills so that they could help offset the burden of their care. As a result, Instituto Román Rosell adopted training programs already proven by 1939 to be ineffective in giving blind men adequate opportunities to earn a living wage.

Instituto Román Rosell began when wealthy businessman and Spanish immigrant Román Rosell died in 1933. In his will he stipulated that the majority of his wealth be used to create an asylum or institute for blind men of Argentine or Spanish nationality. He hoped that the institute would, “provide them [blind men] at least some skills that permit them to be self-sufficient.”⁴⁰ The will stated that Rosell’s wife, Petronila Elisa Herrera de Tedín Uriburu, and two lawyers were to act as executors of the *Fundación "Román Rosell"* (Román Rosell Foundation) and the institution built by the foundation.⁴¹ Remaining monies and annual rents from Rosell’s unsold properties ensured that the institute remained financially solvent and independent for a significant period of time. The Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital was named as the final inheritor of the foundation and institution, and would gain control when the executors could no longer fulfill their duties. This stipulation was designed to ensure that Instituto Román Rosell remained connected to a source of funding and social authority after the original executors passed. Prior to acquisition of the institute, the SBC’s relationship to the institute was that of silent partner.⁴²

⁴⁰ Letter from Petronila H. de Rosell to Doña Elisa Alvear de Bosch, May 11, 1935, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84. ...*algunos medios de vida que les permita bastarse a sí mismos.*

⁴¹ Shortly after Román Rosell's death, Petronila married Virgilio Tedín Uriburu and dropped Rosell from her name.

⁴² In 1946, under the government of Juan Domingo Perón the Sociedad de Beneficencia was dissolved and the Fundación Eva Perón, run by the president’s wife, inherited its institutions.

Rosell's wife Petronila Elisa Herrera de Tedín Uriburu gained significant social power as the director of a private institution in Buenos Aires. One clipping described the opening of the Instituto Román Rosell in the following glowing terms: "One institute more that can bring the light of knowledge to boys disinherited from physical light so that tomorrow they will be useful men to themselves and to society under conditions identical to that of their peers in the world in which they live."⁴³ Connecting that institution to the SBC assured her access to political power and public recognition through multiple news articles, magazine spreads, and tributes regarding the institute between 1935 and 1947. Despite the praise she received in the press when the new institution was announced, Petronila seemed to be in little hurry to begin construction of the proposed institute. Within a year of her husband's death she remarried a noted ophthalmologist and departed for Europe and the United States on a grand tour with famed Buenos Aires architect Louis Newberry Thomas, ostensibly to research institutes for the blind. Her descriptions of her travels suggested that she was more interested in the buildings than in the blind. She described the institute in Vienna as follows: "The building suffers from the defect of being somewhat old, especially considering the progresses made in construction and comfort in recent eras. However, it fills its purpose and has its importance."⁴⁴ She described for the *socias* the exact layout of marble in the hallways, the location of

⁴³ "Se inaguro en marzo el Asilo e Instituto para Ciegos 'Román Rosell,'" *n.p.*, July 13, 1941, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84. *Un instituto más que podrá llevar la luz del saber a los niños desheredados de la luz física para que pueden ser mañana hombres útiles a sí mismos y a la sociedad en idénticas condiciones que sus semejantes dentro del mundo en que actúan.*

⁴⁴ Petronila Elisa Herrera de Tedín Uriburu, "Memoria sobre el viaje a Europa y Estados Unidos de America observación y estudio de los principales institutos y asilos para ciegos," n.d., AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84. *El edificio adolece del defecto de ser un tanto antiguo, sobre todo, teniendo en cuenta los grandes progresos alcanzados en los últimos tiempos en la construcción y confort.- Sin embargo, llena sus fines y tiene su importancia.*

founder's statue, and the cleanliness of the bathrooms. The report contained comparatively few details regarding the blind individuals she met, the educational practices, or the goals of the institutions she toured. For Petronila Elisa Herrera Tedín Uriburu, the institution was about cementing a social legacy and accessing a particular form of class authority dominated by Argentine women.

Women in control of social institutions often utilized highly stylized demonstrations of the importance of their respective institutions to Argentina to reinforce their positions within them. The SBC held their annual award ceremony during which the very publically distributed monetary awards to women they deemed deserving, thereby reinforcing their importance in the lives of poor women. In her case, Petronila needed to show that her project could transform the supposedly inert and unrefined lives of blind men into lives of activity and culture. To reinforce these claims, Petronila extended invitations to ceremonies during which the residents of Instituto Román Rosell performed for a crowd of illustrious guests. Much like the performances put on by Francisco Gatti in the early twentieth century, blind performances created a link between the performers and the audience. In case of the Instituto Román Rosell socias from the SBC were invited to this final ceremony and received special honors as the *madrinas*, or godmothers, of the school. During the ceremony students demonstrated the skills they acquired during the year. Music, particularly classical music, was the centerpiece of these celebrations and was the aspect most equated with culture. The presence of the socias legitimized the institute's project, thereby strengthening its position as a powerful progenitor of social progress.

Music's key role as a form of publicity and the perception that the blind were musically gifted meant that musical education held an exaggerated place in the institute's program of development. Administrators at the Instituto Román Rosell were willing to spend exorbitant amounts of money and political capital on the acquisition of instruments such as an organ imported from Germany.⁴⁵ Petronila justified the purchase of the organ arguing that it was a clear favorite among the blind, yet only two students learned to play the instrument in the five years following its acquisition. The World Conference for the Blind in 1930, repeatedly questioned the viability of musical occupations for the blind. By 1940, other institutions for the blind in Argentina had completely stopped promoting musical training as a viable avenue for securing employment for the blind.⁴⁶ The advent of recorded music decreased the ability of musicians to earn a wage as it increasingly replaced live musicians. Instructors, unlike administrators, at the Instituto Román Rosell began to acknowledge that even good students would not enter musical occupations and began to recommend that the institute limit the enrollment of students in the conservatory to only the most gifted.⁴⁷ The directors never acquiesced to this request, insisting that because musical performance was integral to the perpetuation of the institute's social position, musical education would remain at the heart of curriculum. A description from a

⁴⁵ Letter from Doña Petronila Elisa Herrera de Tedín Uriburu to Doña Rosa Saen Peña de Saavedra Lamas, July 6, 1939, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84; and Letter from Doña Rosa Saen Peña de Saavedra Lamas to Señor Ministro de Hacienda de la Nación Dr. Pedro Groppo, July 7, 1939, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84. The acquisition of the organ is a prime example of the mutually beneficial relationship between Petronila and the socias. After concluding that only an imported organ would suffice Petronila contacted the socias and requested that they intervene with the Ministry of National Finances to permit her to circumvent paying importation taxes on the organ. The Ministry complied without hesitation.

⁴⁶ Lende, McKay, and Swift, *Proceedings of the World Conference*, 155-156 and 383-384.

⁴⁷ "Libro 1, Acto 1," n.d., AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84.

1945 article about Instituto Román Rosell was a powerful illustration of the symbolic place of music in the public perception of the purpose of blind education. Toward the end of the article the anonymous author stated in reference to watching students play at the conservatory:

And our frantic city, our egotistical city, our city that appears to only do for the winners, it can turn its gaze now and then to contemplate those that do not see, to those that do not know of colors or light, to those that are ignorant of the infinite subtleties of form, to those Destiny has deprived from seeing the sky and the light and the stars, to all them for whom the world has lost the marvelous charm of chromatic passage. The blind had been left grave and sad. Now they smile. And they play. There they have received the quota of happiness to which they have a right, as children, as human beings.⁴⁸

The author's comments in the above quote insinuated that while in operation the vast majority of the residential population at the Instituto Román Rosell was "children." All indications suggest that when Petronila began to solicit applicants, she did expect a residential population consisting of young boys, ages six to fourteen from the Capital City and its surroundings.⁴⁹ Petronila received few applications from children in the Federal Capital. By 1940, she was forced to solicit the aid of the SBC's *Comisión de Visitaciones a los Pobres* (Visitation Commission for the Poor) but even this failed to generate residents. After it became clear that she would not find applicants in Buenos Aires, Petronila widened her search to the provinces. After two years of searching she finally generated fifty prospective students through a combination of radio campaigns,

⁴⁸ "Un Oasis de Luz Para Ciegos: El Instituto e Asilo Román Rosell en San Isidro," *Revista Duperial* (January, 1945): 16, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84. *Y nuestra ciudad frenética, nuestra ciudad egoísta, nuestra ciudad para contemplar a los quien no ven, a los que no saben de colores ni de luces, a los que ignoran la sutilezas infinitas de la forma, a los que el Destino los a privado de ver el cielo y la luz y las estrellas, a todo aquellos para quienes el mundo ha perdido el maravillosa encanto cromático de paisaje. Los ciegos han dejado de ser graves y tristes. Ahora sonríen. Y juegan. Allí han recibido la cuota de alegría que tenían derecho, como niños, como seres humanos.*

⁴⁹ Preliminary entrance forms, initial purchases for the library, and early architectural reports clearly indicated that the proprietors of the new institute prepared for an initial student body comprised of children.

newspaper advertisements, and direct solicitation to provincial governments. The students were significantly older than the organization initially anticipated. Though the highest enrollment of children under the age of ten occurred in the first two years of operation, by 1947 only sixteen out of sixty-eight students were under the age of sixteen and at least two were over the age of fifty. Consequently, when Instituto Román Rosell opened its doors in 1941, young men not boys occupied most of the dormitories on the seven-hectare complex.⁵⁰

The teachers hired by Petronila were disconcerted by the lack of school-aged boys at the institute. In 1947, the director of the primary school lamented that, “As in previous years, the number of grade school age students remained relatively low. This can principally be attributed to parents who, due to incomprehension or ignorance, keep their blind children away from centers where they would receive an adequate education for their condition.”⁵¹ The frustration of those in charge at the institute did not translate into major transformations in the initial plan of organization. The directors found that most of the candidates were illiterate and enrolled them in the primary school as initially planned.⁵² Enrolling all the residents into the primary school created massive age

⁵⁰ “Alumnos promovidos-curso escolar 1941,” 1941, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84.

⁵¹ “Memoria de la Escuela Primaria Instituto y Asilo Román Rosell, 1947,” 1947, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84. *Como en años anteriores, el número de alumnos en edad escolar ha sido relativamente bajo. Esto se debe, principalmente, a que muchos padres, por incomprensión o ignorancia, mantienen a sus hijos ciegos alejados de los centros donde podrían recibir una educación adecuada a su condición.*

⁵² Of the four first grade sections three were labeled “inferior” and the fourth “superior.” During 1941 the school also included a preparatory, second, and third grade. The third grade classroom was reserved for students who were literate before their loss of sight. The school eventually expanded to include fourth, fifth, and sixth grades by 1944. A seventh level was added in 1945 supposedly for the sixth grade class who wanted to continue their education. The reality is that the school could not certify the students’ sixth grade certificates due to a battle with various ministries over the qualifications of the faculty and therefore had to

disparities in the classrooms. In first grade section A, the students' ages ranged from ten to fifty with the median age being twenty-two.⁵³ No attempt was made on the part of school directors to group the three first grades by relative age, even though they consistently noted that one of the challenges they faced in the classroom was the disparity in the students' ages.⁵⁴

For sighted administrators and educators at the institute, blindness created a permanent childhood only disrupted by the intervention of education. At the root of this construction of blindness was the issue of dependency. Dependency was the antithesis of masculine adulthood. Because blind residents were on some level dependent on others, teachers and administrators could treat them as children rather than as fully realized male adults. Adult male identity was defined largely by the ability to work and the type of work conducted. Blind leadership at the HCVCC, La Fraternal, the BAC, and the La Colonia characterized untrained blind adults as incomplete or undignified versions of ideal masculinity. They argued that through re-education programs blind men could be made dignified or "whole" again. At Instituto Román Rosell, blind men were characterized as children who might attain a kind of adolescence by pass through a fundamental act of being a child, attending primary school.

Educators hired by Petronila were not trained to work with the blind, and came to see blind education as one fraught with pathology. Blind students, they argued, were

keep the students in classes until that issue was resolved. All indications point to a period of several years before that issue was resolved.

⁵³ "Alumnos promovidos, 1941," 1941, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84.

⁵⁴ Inferior Class A's ages were: 10, 17, 26, 20, 24, 38, 50, 22; Inferior Class B: 14, 15, 13, 14, 27; Inferior Class C: 18, 18, 16, 17, 20, 37, 35; ages could potentially have been grouped in three sections ranging 10-16, 17-22, and 24-50.

prone to a number of psychological problems that prevented them from succeeding.⁵⁵ The teachers' central concern regarded what they believed was the residents' psychological propensity toward negativity and low self-esteem. These problems led blind individuals to be passive and diminished their motivation to adjust to new circumstances. These were the most problematic of several traits known as *cieguismos* (blindisms) that the staff desired to train out of the residents.⁵⁶ Teachers at the institute were heavily influenced by the growing popularity of Freud in Argentina. They noted their students' tendency toward inferiority complexes, negativity, and their subconscious terror of making errors.⁵⁷ In some ways, the supposed problems of the blind reflected the sighted staff's imagination of what being blind might be like, and were perhaps as much personal responses of the sighted to blindness as they were cognitive issues of blind individuals. Educators perceived blindness as an inferior state of existence that created self-pity, depression, and esteem issues. They assumed that students who achieved a healthy acceptance of their condition would demonstrate gratefulness to those who had lifted them out of their low mental state. This led one teacher to state that some healthy students, "comprehend their social situation as blind persons, the notable work realized for their benefit by the Asylum-Institute, they are sincerely grateful and they contribute, to the best of their abilities, to fulfill the hopes that they have deposited in them."⁵⁸ The goal of the staff was

⁵⁵ Koestler, *The Unseen Minority*; Hayoe, *God, Money, and Politics*; Weygand, *The Blind in French Society*; and Phillips, *The Blind in British Society*.

⁵⁶ "Memoria de la Escuela PriMaría del Insituto e Asilo Román Rosell, 1944," 1944, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84.

⁵⁷ For more on Freud in Argentina see, Plotkin, *Freud in the Pampas*.

⁵⁸ Memoria de la Escuela del Instituto e Asilo Román Rosell, 1944. *Unos comprenden su situación como no-videntes, la obra notable que realiza en su beneficio el Asilo-Instiute, la agradecen sinceramente y contribuyen, en la medida de sus fuerzas, a colmar las esperanzas que en ellos se han depositado.*

to elevate all their students to the same psychological stability as these more “grateful” students.

To improve the students’ mental health the staff emphasized physical education. As was the case at La Colonia, staff saw physical control over their bodies as crucial to emotional health. In 1942, the physical education instructor, Armendo Mario Monti, boasted that his training had given the students the confidence to not only move about the school, but to run in it.⁵⁹ Monti’s comments reflected the same value placed on physical mobility at the La Colonia colony. However, professors at Instituto Román Rosell were more concerned with Monti’s ability to rid their students of the physical tics they also referred to as *cieguismos*.⁶⁰ Physical *cieguismos* included: balancing the body in a direction other than upright, pressing the fingers or hands to the eyes or face, rapid turns in place followed by small jumps, and tilting the head to one side. These tics were considered detrimental because they made the student uncomfortable and suggested movements made by persons with mental illness. This was antithetical to the institutions’ attempts to demonstrate to sighted benefactors the schools’ ability to train cultured individuals.

Concern about residents’ control over their bodies was an issue of social assimilation rather than concern about employability. Petronila and other administrators demonstrated relatively little interest in generating work options for residents outside the institution. At its inauguration, the plan for the primary school, the musical conservatory, and the daily routines of the asylum were set and only minimally changed over the next

⁵⁹ “Memoria de la Escuela del Instituto e Asilo Román Rosell,” 1942; and Memoria de la Escuela del Instituto e Asilo Román Rosell, 1944.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

five years. The workshops, were initially in disarray. However, vocational training was seen as a key component of any program for the blind and the school had to develop some vocational program. In February, five months before the opening ceremonies and two months after students began arriving, *El Mundo* reported that the workshops would teach basket-making, cabinet making, book binding, and weaving. Only one of those workshops, bookbinding, was incorporated into the final schedule of workshops in the opening year.⁶¹ Five months later, a report of the opening ceremonies by *La Prensa* reflected a more accurate description of the workshops incorporated into the institute: whickering, book-binding, paintbrush and fine brush making, carpentry, and mattress stuffing.⁶² The serious confusion over the direction of the workshops was further reflected in the first annual report published in 1942, which stated that the workshops began operating too late in the year to provide detailed account of their production or plan. Compared to the primary school and the musical conservatory, the organization of the workshops was severely neglected in the first year of the Institute's existence.

The delayed implementation of the workshops reflected several issues at the institute. First, it is likely that administrators expected the first class to be school age and therefore delayed preparation of the workshops to allow students time to age into them. Additionally, planning the workshops required more extensive research and preparation than other institutional components. To plan the primary school and musical conservatory, administrators simply adapted the curriculum in use at the National Institute for the Blind in Buenos Aires. They hired teachers from the local normal schools

⁶¹ "Terminose la Obra del Instituto Asilo para Ciegos, 'Román Rosell,'" *El Mundo*, February 4, 1941, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84.

⁶² "Esta tarde se inauguro en San Isidro el Instituto para Ciegos Román Rosell," *La Prensa*, July 12, 1941, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84. The list failed to mention broom making which was possibly a last minute edition to the workshops.

and established professors of music. This was not as possible in the workshops. By the 1940s the manual production of goods like brushes and brooms was rare due to the intensification of import substitution policies and the increasing industrial manufacture of daily goods. Finding sighted instructors with basic knowledge of increasingly rarified workshop skills and enough experienced to adapt specialized manual labor skills to their blind students was less straightforward than hiring primary school teachers. Despite these difficulties, newspapers and magazine articles tended to latch onto the workshops as the most important element of the institute, glorifying them as a means of making the blind man useful. Consequentially, between 1941 and 1943 the workshops took on an experimental nature and shifted significantly based on assumptions about the students' capacity, economic trends, and the structural needs of the institute.

The workshops began operations with six different sections: whickering, fine brush and paintbrush making, broom making, carpentry, mattress stuffing and bookbinding, the first three activities being most popular. The popular workshops produced goods that were more frequently sold outside of the institution, and in bulk quantities. This was an advantage for students because they could collect a greater amount of money from the sale of these items. Students earned ten percent of every item sold after the cost of materials was deducted. Outside the institute the goods could be sold for significantly higher prices, especially when marketed as handcrafts whose sale supported a charitable cause.⁶³ Goods like paintbrushes and baskets, for example, earned a premium when marketed as hand produced by the blind and then sold to upper class individuals. When Instituto Román Rosell purchased goods from the workshops it did so

⁶³ "Memoria de los Talleres del Instituto e Asilo Román Rosell, 1946," 1946, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84.

only slightly above cost, meaning that every good produced for the benefit Instituto Román Rosell significantly reduced the amount earned by the student who produced it.⁶⁴

For students working in the carpentry and bookbinding sections, the institution's practice of purchasing at cost was a significant disadvantage. In 1943, the top earning carpenter made fifty-three pesos while the top-earning student in fine brushes made two hundred and fifty-six pesos.⁶⁵ Carpentry projects tended to be for the benefit of the institute. These students made tables, chairs, stools, etc. and their work was more time consuming than brush making; required greater care and skill; and some assistance from a sighted worker at the finishing stage. The same held true for bookbinding, which predominately bound the Braille books produced by the professors and students for use in the Instituto Román Rosell library. For a time, Instituto Román Rosell benefited from these workshops because they reduced the institute's need to purchase furnishings and books at retail prices. In 1943 alone, the carpentry workshop spent almost the entire year producing articles for use in the institute. The residents sat at carpentry students' tables and the staff climbed their stools to reach high places. Additionally, the labor of bookbinding students significantly reduced the number of books purchased from the BAC, allowing for the expansion of the Instituto Román Rosell library.

For male residents of Instituto Román Rosell the highest earning potential lay in the workshops that produced bulk goods for sale outside the institute. However, the piecework structure of the pay scale meant even in the highest earning workshops, student earnings ranged widely. For example, earnings among brush makers varied

⁶⁴ "Memoria de los Talleres del Instituto e Asilo Román Rosell, 1943," 1942, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84.

⁶⁵ Top earners in other sections: mattresses=96.52, brooms = 108.67, books = 36.00, and whickering = 41.48. Ibid.

between 43 centavos and 256 pesos. The pay mechanisms of the institute created a disparity of earnings between the students. After five years of labor, some residents were owed upwards of seven hundred and fifty pesos while the vast majority maintained between one hundred and two hundred pesos in their accounts.⁶⁶ Few of the students earned enough at the institute to support themselves even minimally outside of it. The average yearly earnings from the workshops ranged from twelve (bookbinding) to sixty pesos (brushes), though the pay of a few top earners skewed these averages.

The workshop system was supposedly at the heart of the institute's efforts to turn useless blind boys into useful blind men. However, the manual trades chosen by the institute were generally considered to be women's work in the world of blind education. In a detailed accounting of standard workshops for the blind given at the "World Conference on Work for the Blind" in 1931, S.W. Starling, General Superintendant and Secretary for the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind in England identified all but two, carpentry and bookbinding, of the trades chosen by Instituto Román Rosell as women's work.⁶⁷ After those two workshops were removed in 1943, they were replaced by mechanical weaving, another area historically considered women's work. The addition of weaving introduced the first and only female instructor to the institute.

⁶⁶ "Cuentas Particulares, 1946," 1946, AGN, Sociedad de Beneficencia, Institutos de Minoridad, Asilo Román Rosell, 1935-1950, legajo 84. There is no indication that students could access these accounts while they resided at Román Rosell. Students' pay was directly deposited based on the report of the director of the workshops and oversight was in the hands of the Institute's fiscal.

⁶⁷ "Memoria de los Talleres del Instituto e Asilo Román Rosell, 1943." In his annual report for 1943 the director recommending closing the workshops as students were unlikely to use skills learned in these workshops because they would have to compete with the sighted. Not included in the director's report, was that the rising cost of materials and a decline in the institutions need for the goods produced in these workshops meant they were no longer profitable. Instituto Román Rosell could obtain most of the goods produced in the carpentry shop at prices lower than the cost of the raw material, which continued to rise through the 1940s. In bookbinding, by 1943 Instituto Román Rosell had established a working relationship with the BAC that allowed students to check out as many books as they desired from the BAC's collection. This reduced the pressure on the institute to build up a library of its own.

In an era of intensely gendered rhetoric and strict institutional division of sexes, the willingness to train men for women's work is telling. The skills learned in the workshops were not meant to be portable to sighted male industries. Skills such as whickering, brush making and broom making were intended to provide skills for cottage or home-based industries that would allow individuals to earn a supporting wage through the sale of handicrafts. As stated above, the putting out system was one of the few arenas where women dominated in Argentina. Blind hand crafts were construed in similar ways to women's production of clothing. The sale of workshop crafts was intended to lessen the financial burden on a blind individual's family or institution. The work structure of the institute assumed the perpetual dependency of residents. Most men at the institute were designated for vocational training as opposed to musical training. This meant that at Instituto Román Rosell most men were trained in feminine labors that were unlikely to lead to the full independence that Petronila and administrators associated with masculine adulthood. As a result, residents could be discussed in childlike terminology, stripped of gendered characteristics. The ongoing dependency of Instituto Román Rosell residents insured the position of its female director and its future as an all male institution administered by an organization historically committed to social service for women and children.

Conclusions

For all the institutions discussed here, notions about blind masculinity fundamentally informed the structure of the institutional programs. Whether institutions sought to recover blind men from undignified masculinity or could not accept blind men

as fully realized adult men, all of institutional authorities felt that the masculinity of unemployed blind men was in some way broken or unrealized. The problem these institutions faced was that by 1930 there was a large contingent of educated blind men with vocational training in the city of Buenos Aires who could not find work. Simply providing education and training had not proven sufficient to convince potential sighted employers to hire blind men, nor had extensive propaganda campaigns about blind capabilities. Ongoing problems with employment created rifts between blind leaders with different political philosophies, such as between the BAC, La Fraternal, and the HCVCC. The continued presence of indigent blind men in Buenos Aires streets gave the impression that further education and training were needed and that existing programs were useless. This combined with the continued absence of education for the blind in the provinces led some, like Julio Peralta and Petronila Tedín Uriburu to create new institutions in order to fill real and perceived gaps in the existing institutional structures. Ultimately, institutional construction and propaganda had only a superficial effect on the financial welfare of the blind. It predominately aided highly educated males were able to secure employment as teachers and employees at institutions for the blind. Only these individuals truly exemplified the type of masculinity they sought to inculcate in others.

Chapter Seven:

Conclusion

In the 1930s, the blind population had become highly visible and blind leadership politically pro-active. The expansion and diversification of social services for the blind demonstrated the new power of educated blind leaders to define the shape and direction of social services for the blind. However, this new position came at the cost of unity among blind leaders. Between 1880 and 1939, education, vocational training, job placement programs and so on, yielded very slow and incremental improvements in ability of the blind population to secure employment. Sighted liberal reformers implemented programs that focused on childhood education and assumed that as more blind individuals acquired cultural and intellectual literacy their economic and social standing in society would improve as a result. When an opportunity arose for blind leaders to directly address the issue of social services in the 1920s, they focused their efforts on adults and job placement. However, by the end of the period none of the approaches by either the sighted reformers or blind leaders had affected dramatic change. Certainly, there were individuals who as a result of the training they received, were able to secure well-paid employment, but leader did not want to merely improve the lives of a few individuals. They wanted large-scale change and social integration for the blind community as a whole.

The obstacle that blind leaders confronted but rarely acknowledge was the effect of persistent prejudices about the blind's physical capacities to perform in a sighted world. Julio R. Peralta, director of La Colonia was the only blind leader to begin to

recognize the role that ideas about the blind's physical mobility, strength, and agility affected their ability to find work. The rest of the blind leaders and many of the sighted reformers, focused intently on proving the intellectual capacities of the blind. In an era in which health and education professionals used mental and intellectual capacity to divide the fit from the unfit, demonstrating that the blind could produce art, literature, and music helped to divide blindness from "dangerous" and destabilizing disabilities.

Between 1880 and 1910, the era of the positivists, the burgeoning idea that the blind were intellectually "normal" actually slowed the construction of specialized institutions for the blind. This was an era of dramatic expansion of institutions throughout Argentina, but especially in Buenos Aires. Sighted liberal reformers believed that they had to catch up to the U.S. and Europe after years of conservative politics and violent political consolidation. Specialized institutions for the blind represented a form of modernization but one that addressed problems of organizing urban space rather than as a means to control or discipline problematic populations like those with infectious disease or mental illnesses. As a result, blind institutions were a low priority for sighted liberal reformers and the first attempt to create an institution was primarily a private endeavor.

Once state interest in projects for the blind increased it became clear that sighted liberal reformers did not view blind intellectual capacity as equal to that of the sighted. Proposals for a national institute created by Ulises J. Codino and Cecilia Griersons at the turn of the century demonstrated the ongoing prejudices regarding the intellectual capacities of the blind as directors or administrators in blind institutions. In these reformers estimations, in addition to their supposedly inferior grasp of concrete subject matter, blind individuals were incapable of disciplining blind children. Disciplining blind

children was crucial for the professionals and humanitarian reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, social services for the blind were constructed almost exclusively for children as a result of liberalism's international proscriptions regarding labor, education and the free market. Specialists on blindness in the U.S. and Europe warned against social services for adults that threatened to corrupt the characters of blind adults through indolence. Hence, early institutions focused on children, although with a flexible understanding of childhood rooted in the supposed natural dependency of the blind. At Argentine institutions like the INC, childhood could last into a blind individuals' twenties.

Despite the theories espoused by sighted liberal reformers about the blind, Argentina did not have any sighted experts on blind education, nor would any travel from Europe to help the Argentines put an institution in place. This created an opening for Francisco Gatti to insert himself into the institutionalization process. However, Gatti underestimated the effect his blindness had on the opinions of the sighted regarding his capacities. He believed himself to be the equal of the sighted Argentines who supported his institution and believed they felt the same. He was shocked by the decision of the national congress to demote him within his own institution in favor of the woman who had served as his subordinate for many years. What Gatti failed to understand was that while the sighted individuals he worked with believed him to be intellectually competent, their understanding of competency was qualified. Gatti was intelligent, but as a blind man his intelligence was seen as inferior to those who were his socio-economic equals. During this period the intellectual capacities of the blind continued to be challenged by sighted reformers who believed that blind capacities were inferior as a result of blindness.

While Gatti fought to maintain some level of authority and prestige within the institution of his own creation, a small group of blind individuals began to unify in Buenos Aires. These were Gatti's former students and recent immigrants to the city. By 1916, this group formed a small political community that began to test the limits of sighted authority over blind social services and to challenge sighted reformers' perceptions about the intellectual capacity of the blind. In the aftermath of the student strike initiated by blind students who were members of this community, blind leaders asserted that the blind were the intellectual equals, and at times superiors, to the sighted. They demanded an equal share in the decision-making processes that directly affected them. The response from sighted reformers indicated that the blind were still very far from being considered the intellectual equals of the sighted by the sighted. Investigator Bartolomé Ayrolo, scoffed at the idea that the blind were equals and pathologized the characters of the students who believed that they were equals. For this reason, blind leaders continued to believe that proving the intellectual capacity of the blind was crucial if the blind were going to be accepted as capable workers and social equals in sighted society.

The student strike was a significant turning point in the history of blind institutions because in the aftermath of the strike the most enthusiastic sighted reformers were forced out of positions of authority. This created the second opportunity for blind individuals to move into positions as leaders in the push to create social services for the blind. To consolidate their authority and to prove the intellectual capacity of the blind, blind leaders developed their institutions as centers of cultural production, shared by the blind and sighted alike. The BAC, in particular, was designed to be an active social center

that would demonstrate to observers the ideals of equality between the blind and sighted that they believed could develop in society in general. In doing so, however, the BAC did not fully develop direct aid programs to help individuals facing personal economic crises. Nor, did they develop mechanisms to publicly challenge state entities or other institutional programs when they made problematic claims about the blind. More importantly, their programs continued to be fairly limited and most useful to blind adults who already had a formal education and vocational training. For some members of the educated blind community the limitations of the BAC's project were unacceptable.

Conflict between blind leaders over the direction and purpose of institutions led to a dramatic expansion of those institutions in the 1930s. In addition to disagreements about the scope of social services for the blind, at the center of the divisions between blind leaders were conflicts over the definition of dignified labor for the blind. Organizations that tended to espouse politics slightly left of center tended to focus on the creation of new-dignified job markets. They wanted to find fields in which the blind could earn wages equivalent to the sighted and in which they would be accepted as equals of the sighted. These organizations, including the BAC, La Fraternal, and La Colonia, wanted to eradicate the use of specialized occupational training for the blind in fields that had no corresponding industry for the sighted. These ideas about dignified labor were directly connected to these organizations understandings of masculinity and dignity. Equal wages meant that blind men could support their families and act as male heads of house in the same manner as their sighted counterparts. More importantly, however, when the blind worked in industries that also employed the sighted, it removed the stigma of charity from that labor. Traditional blind labors often involved the sale of small goods,

either hand crafted by the blind or goods purchased cheaply and sold at a profit, like cigarettes or candy. This kind of labor existed somewhere between formal labor and charity. It generated the question, did people buy from the blind seller because they needed his product, or in order to provide aid to a blind individual? The BAC and La Fraternal wanted to remove all vestiges of dependence from blind labor so that the blind man could achieve a kind of complete and dignified adult masculinity.

Organizations that leaned right of center, namely the HCVCC, focused on the traditional avenue of creating a public image of blind men as highly cultured. It also continued to promote traditional blind crafts as an avenue for blind men to earn money. They created vocational training programs in basketry and whickering at their organization. They also began to work with the state to attempt to legitimize blind street vendors to protect them from harassment. They subsequently, attempted to make street vending a specialized niche for the blind protected by the state. HCVCC was more worried with meeting the practical and immediate economic needs of blind men, than they were with structural issues of equal and dignified labor. Family and blind male labor were still at the center of HCVCC concerns about social services, but the organization was more focused on addressing the immediate problems of housing, food, and clothing than in dealing with why those things were problems at all. For Marchi and her colleagues blind dignity was rooted in the stability and security of economic solvency, no matter how that was achieved. Thus, Maria Marchi suggested the creation of a colony for blind families where they would have shelter and access to workshops. The ultimate goal for Marchi was still the formation of nuclear blind families headed by a blind male laborer. In her estimation it was the act of providing for a family that dignified blind men

and made them men. The type of labor performed to provide for their families did not matter.

Throughout the period examined, blind organizations whether organized by the sighted or blind, never directly addressed blind women's needs or desires. Even organizations like the BAC that actually built a factory for blind women, rarely directly discussed blind women's issues. For institutional authorities, blind women presented a particular problem. They were less likely to marry than their male counterparts, but many seemed resistant to the idea of training women in the same vocations as men. If blind men and women were trained in the same fields it might compromise the quest to locate dignified, or masculine, labor for blind men. Training women to work in the putting out system associated with textile crafts would never afford them the ability to be self sufficient. Because they did not marry, this meant that to access higher male wages they had to rely on either a father or other male relative. In order to discover more about how blind women worked and lived during this period it will be necessary to do more work with the available census material and individual personal records from institutions where blind women lived. This would help to build up a demographic picture of blind women's lives and perhaps begin to understand the relationship between blind women and work, family, and institutions.

For years, blind leaders worked with, around and through sighted institutions in order to forward an agenda of independence and equality for the blind. Between 1920 and 1940, blind leaders became the principle arbiters of blind services in Buenos Aires, which it self created divisions between blind leaders about the goals of those services. However, sighted reformers never completely ignored the blind or blind institutions. Specialized

institutions for the blind were still important components within ideas about how the modern city and state should be organized. Therefore it is not surprising, that by the end of this period, sighted reformers began to re-emerge as important figures in blind institutions. These sighted reformers came from more varied political backgrounds than their predecessors. By the 1940s, institutions for the blind were being re-conceptualized by the sighted as belonging to a system of institutions designed to "rehabilitate" disabled person for assimilation into "normal" society.

An Epilogue

In 1939, blindness and politics converged at the highest levels of authority in Argentina. The year before, Roberto María Ortiz was elected president, under the portion of the *Union Civica Radical* (Radical Civic Union) belonging to the highly corrupt *Concordancia*. Though Ortiz gave every appearance during the elections of being healthy, in private, unchecked diabetes eroded his physical condition. Most importantly, the newly elected president was rapidly going blind. Almost as soon as he was elected, the office of the president was forced to acquire a specialized typewriter for Ortiz and specialists were called into examine the president to see what could be done. Ortiz's blindness was initially a secret but was exposed in 1939. The revelation that the president was blind created a political crisis in Argentina as various factions in government vied for power.

As the presidential health scandal unfolded in the press another developed at the center of the government's principle institution for the blind, the INC. In 1935, José Pérez Mendoza's IAC was revamped under a new name, the *Patronato Nacional para Ciegos*

(The National Foundation for the Blind, hereafter PNC).¹ The PNC was organized to begin to try and consolidate the few services for the blind provided by the government, namely the INC and the *Consultaría Pedro Lagleyze* (The Pedro Lagleyze Clinic). In 1939, the role of the PNC dramatically shifted after a scandal that echoed the INC's past erupted once at the institute. Students at the INC accused one of the professors of conduct that "violated morality."² The accusations triggered a police investigation as well as an internal audit of the administration of the institution. According to reports, "In five months of residency, Mr. Niño [the state's investigator], has confirmed for our informants, that the daily administrative and didactic life of the Board is absolute anarchy. The system of intrigues, rumors, orders and counter-orders from animosities against certain people, bring absolute bewilderment."³ In addition, the audit found that PNC administrators had inverted nearly 10,000.00 pesos in a semi-illegal arrangement with a U.S. specialist in blind education.⁴

In the wake of the revelations regarding the national institute, the MIP took drastic action. That same year they took direct control over the PNC, reformed its directive committee and issued a detailed description of their plans to construct all of the institutions promised under the legislation passed in 1913. In their 1939 *Memoria* they stated, "Beyond private initiative, which in numerous cases has given spiritual and

¹ "Se propone la fundación del Patronato de Ciegos," September, 4, 1935, *El Pueblo*, Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, Crónica, 1934-1937.

² Ibid.

³ "Funciona anormalmente el Patronato de Ciegos," August 3, 1939, *Nueva Palabra*, Biblioteca Argentina para Ciegos, Crónica, 1937-1939. *En cinco meses de permanencia del señor Niño , según lo afirman nuestros informantes, la vida normal administrativa y didáctica del Patronato quedó absolutamente anarquizada. El sistema de intrigas, de rumores, órdenes y contraórdenes, de animosidades contra ciertas personas, llevaron el más absoluta desconcierto.*

⁴ Ibid.

material momentum to philanthropic and social labors, it is the State through its representative organisms, that must be at the forefront of the problem of orientation and aid to the blind."⁵ The PNC's statement was more than just an assertion of renewed commitment to the blind by the state. In that same year they began construction on new homes for the elderly blind, two vocational schools, and fully consolidated their control over the Consultaría "Pedro Lagleyze" and the national institute.⁶ In addition they began to provide direct social services to the blind through a system of pensions and through free legal council for all blind individuals.

The PNC was more than a series of new institutions, however. The ministry made the PNC the primary governing body to which all services for the blind in the country, public or private, now answered. All teachers at blind institutions had to receive special licenses from the PNC and the organization certified the legitimacy of all diplomas granted by blind schools. The PNC was charged with authorizing all vocational programs and providing subsequent licensing to graduates of those programs. Finally, they consolidated their authority as the primary agent through which all legislative projects on blind issues were vetted and proposed. The PNC was now the central authority to which all institutions for the blind were required to report. Unlike earlier years, this time the PNC intended on using the full extent of the authority granted to it by the Ministerio de Instrucción Publica and it had the political backing to do so.

⁵ Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Publica, *Patronato Nacional de Ciegos: Memoria correspondiente a 7 meses del ejercicio 1939* (Buenos Aires, 1940), 1. *Fuera de la iniciativa privada, que en numerosas casos ha dado impulso espiritual y material a las obras filantrópicas y sociales, es el Estado por medio de sus organismos representativos, quien hace frente al problema de la orientación y ayuda a los ciegos.*

⁶ Ibid. The Consultoría "Pedro Lagleyze" was the only institution created by the directive body of the IAC during Jose Perez Mendoza's years as director. It was a free eye clinic named in homage to one of the members of that original directive body. Evidence indicates that between 1917 and 1939 it functioned independently from the INC and its governing body.

The directive committees of the PNC were comprised of key members of President Ortiz's inner circle. PNC President María Adela Ayarragaray de Pereda was a friend and associate of the president's wife. Member Dr. Alberto M. N. Fernandez Saralegui was the president's personal physician charged with administering his daily doses of insulin. Members of the Comisión Consultiva Dr. Amadeo Natale and Monsignor Dr. Miguel De Andrea were respectively the consulting oculist in the president's case and the priest who administered the president's last rites.⁷ It is likely that the positions of these individuals on the directive boards of the PNC were directly related to their positions vis a vis the president's conditions and gave both of the PNC's directive bodies significant amounts of power while Ortiz and his sympathizers remained in authority. The socio-economic positions of the remaining members of the directive committees signaled a shift in the government's approach to the institutionalization of the blind in favor of more familiar authority figures. Five other doctors and seven women whose names were associated with the financial and social elite in Buenos Aires joined the president's close associates on the boards. By the end of the year, it was clear that the institution that now held the most control over social services for the blind in the country would not include any of the blind leaders or blind professionals who had worked throughout the 1920s and 1930s to build public interest in blind issues and expand the breadth of available services to the blind.

Despite the absence of any blind leaders on the PNC's directive bodies, the PNC was not a complete return to liberal positivist models of education. Additionally, blind leaders were no longer marginalized young activists united by a common goal. The PNC had the power and authority to accomplish what the blind organizations could not.

⁷ Ibid; and Felix Luna, *Ortiz: Reportaje a la Argentina Opulenta* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2012).

However, during its years of operation, the PNC had to work with a set of priorities for the blind largely put in place by the organizations run by blind leaders in the decades prior to the PNC's creation. The organization provided extensive services for adults, largely focused on vocational training. They produced propaganda that informed the public that the blind were completely equal in every respect to the sighted. Finally, they continued to work with blind leaders, after all by 1945, the BAC was listed as the eleventh largest Braille library in the world and the second largest Spanish Braille library.⁸

In the first half of the 1940s, the PNC essentially functioned as a specialized department for the blind within government. Though it was subject to the MIP, the PNC oversaw all issues regarding blindness and the blind even those not of an educational nature. With the full power and authority of the state behind it, the PNC finally fulfilled the goals of sighted liberal humanitarians established by the passage of law 9339 in 1913. By centralizing control over blind institutions the PNC could correct the problem of blind administrators at institutions for the blind throughout the country by creating a layer of sighted authority that would monitor and control the actions of those administrators. In the face of the ascendance of the PNC, blind leadership had little response. It seems that it did not matter if the PNC was paternalistic as long as it fulfilled its promises to the blind.

The PNC experiment ended with the Peróns. In 1952, the *New York Times* reported that Juan Perón had commissioned an embossed portrait of himself to allow “the

⁸ Enrique Sparr, *Sobre la existencia de bibliotecas y museos para ciegos al sobrevenir la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Córdoba, Argentina: Imprenta de la Universidad, 1948), 6-7.

blind to see his face.”⁹ The article was intended to highlight the leader’s hubris for a U.S. audience nervous about Peron’s political philosophies. But the portrait could also be read as the culmination of an increasing tendency in Argentina to position the blind as an important population worthy of extensive attention from governmental authorities and private charities. The portrait also reflected the personalism of the Perón government’s approach to social services. Even the blind would have a direct and intimate understanding of Peron’s countenance. The Perón government’s approach to blind social services mirrored similar attempts to shift power away from traditional sectors and toward Peron’s government. Almost as soon as he became president in 1946, Peron broke up the PNC into its constituent parts and dismissed the organizations directive committees. Medical organizations, social assistance programs, and educational facilities were all placed under the authority of the ministries to which they corresponded. Under Peron then, social services for the blind became fully incorporated into the apparatus of the state, but it remains unclear how the Perón state understood that relationship and what affect it had on blind leadership and organization.

⁹ “Argentina Moves to Let Blind ‘See’ Peron’s Face,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July, 10, 1952, 1; and “Peron ‘Pictured’ in Braille,” *New York Times*, July, 10, 1952, 18. It is important to note that the timing of this portrait coincided with the death of Eva Peron and may have reflected Juan Peron’s desire to shift her image as a benefactor of “los pobres” to himself.

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