

1963**Juan José Hernández-Arregui, 'What is the National Being?' (Excerpts)****Citation:**

"Juan José Hernández-Arregui, 'What is the National Being?' (Excerpts)", 1963, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Juan José Hernández-Arregui, ¿Qué es el ser nacional? (What is the National Being?) (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1963), 291-293. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh.

<https://wilson-center.drivingcreative.com/document/291051>

Summary:

Juan José Hernández-Arregui (1913-1974), the Argentinian author of the Spanish book published originally in 1963 in Buenos Aires from which the excerpt here has been translated into English, was a journalist from a very young age, an intellectual, and an official. Having received his PhD in 1944, he from 1945 worked principally as a history and economics professor, and had a cultural program in the State Radio.

At the time, in 1946, a career army officer, Juan Perón (1895-1974), who in 1943-1945 had served as secretary of labor and social security and as minister of war in a military-led government, became Argentine's president. He and his wife Eva were very popular especially among the poor for his social policies and approach to the working classes, and he worked closely inter alia with the General Confederation of Labor to promote economic independence. In 1955, a military coup forced him into exile, first in Venezuela and finally in Spain. (He would serve as president again from 1973 until his death in 1974). Although he was in exile and his party was outlawed, his broad brand of nationalism—leftist-statist with strong right-wing populist elements—remained deeply influential in Argentina.

Hernández-Arregui was a case in point. Though fired from academic posts after the coup, he remained the director of the Instituto de Historia de la Universidad Nacional de la Plata, retained his radio program—and was able to militate for Perón. In well-read newspaper texts, he soon called for Perón's return. And his books—at that time most importantly *Imperialismo y cultura* (1957) and *La formación de la conciencia nacional* (1960) besides *¿Qué es el ser nacional?* [What is the National Being?] (1963) which is excerpted text here—made him a leading protagonist of el peronismo revolucionario, revolutionary (i.e. leftist) Peronism. Peronism defined itself and was seen as a very much Argentinian ideology, not unlike earlier nationalisms in South America's second-largest country.

At the same time, as other nationalist ideologies since the 19th century, it and related

nationalisms developed within global context. In the event, a key context was the rising tide of decolonization in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, as Michael Goebel's "Von der hispanidad zum Panarabismus: globale Verflechtungen in Argentinien's Nationalismen" (2011) has shown. Sure, the Cuban revolution exerted a considerable pull especially on leftist Peronists as it did on others in Latin America and beyond. But the Algerian War of Independence greatly interested Argentines, too. And perhaps most influential as a model to think with was the anti-imperialist leftist-statist nationalist Egypt under President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970; r. from 1954), as the text here shows.

Original Language:

Spanish

Contents:

Translation - English

[...]

Each people has to conduct its revolution building on its collective national traditions. The anticolonial revolutions of the twentieth century [all] carry this characteristic. Both issues, the national and the colonial, are intertwined in the global order, though here and now they emerge in the [anticolonial] peoples as a national historical task. This fact has been affirmed by men like Fidel Castro or Abd-El Nasser: "The traits of peoples and the elements constituting their national personality imply a divergence between the plans that each one has adopted to solve its own problems," the Arab leader has written. "But the principal disagreement has been created by the instable conditions that govern the world, especially those that have arisen after World War II (1939-1945), provoking a series of chain reactions." Imperialism seeks to psychologically worsen these reactions, presenting the issue as a fight between races, for example between Occidental culture and "the Asian hordes." This is a nauseating cock-and-bull story. Regarding the colonized countries, how can the Occident brag and call itself Christian? This is nothing more than covering up plutocrats' deals with religious symbols. What can these "occidentalists" reply to the words of a patriot like Nasser? "Long before the Ottoman invasion cast its shadow over the entire region, the exceptionally courageous Egyptian people had accepted its decisive responsibility to look after everybody's benefit. It had assumed the material and military responsibility to thwart the first waves of colonialism that, though camouflaged by the Christian cross, certainly did not follow the precepts of our glorious Master [God]." For the Arab people, Occidental Christianity has been colonizing barbarity. Technical progress reduces these racial and cultural discriminations to the point where they become junk. Technology has not only made the planet smaller. It has broken cultural walls. And in the light of history, imperialism can now be seen for what it is, as barbarity opposed to culture, as imperialism and not as humanism. Imperialism has inoculated entire people with the need for freedom—a need that is the response to [imperialism's] plunder, not the invader's philanthropy. This response is the national thinking, which does not anymore prosecutes itself with the help foreign ideas, but rather prosecutes European ideas and myths through the national objective.

These myths can be—and are—suggestive for the high-lettered layers of society that have been thrown off balance by the culture of imperialism. But they cannot do the same thing to the masses. The masses are immune. They do not believe that the native is incapable of constructing a nation; this issue does not even occur to them. As the colony is in crisis, the historical appearance of the national masses revolutionizes the other classes' conscience. Hence, national conscience blooms not passively but as an active act, driven by the [colonized] peoples [pouring] into world politics like a torrential avalanche. As this historical conscience is related to practical action by the masses, it is expressed not as the hope to become a country one day, like Polish messianism. Rather, it is expressed as a country that is already on its way and that demands the means to finish that work. Without doubt, these means are theoretical, in as far as that ideology is the compass of the people's liberating action. But more than anything else, they are practical. They are constituted by the country's economic means, which only the people's economic intervention and politics of production can mobilize. This is what explains the massive counter-attacks [by imperialism] against the working masses, which happen even when they are organized in institutions that are tied to the national interest, like the military. The counter-attacks continue until the very military and the classes that are pulled into mass action conclusively clarify the national question. It is the masses who are the educators of the national conscience: "The role of the armed forces," Nasser has written, "is to protect the social structure from all external dangers. They always have to be at the ready to crush any reactionary colonialist attempt to prevent that the people achieves its great hopes."

A military that does not understand this issue is nothing more than a branch of colonialism, decked out in flags and banners—a branch of colonialism, which is turning it against its own country and against itself, as Nasser has concluded: "The efficiency of national militaries is based on the nation's economic and social might." This economic and social might can only be realized through the work of the masses and through national industry.