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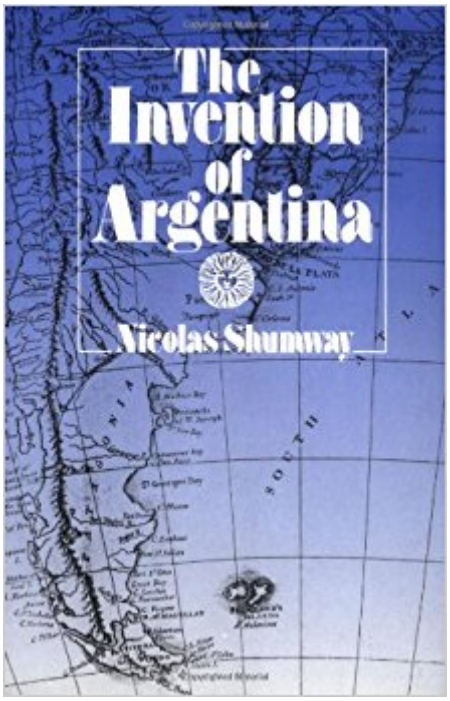

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Synopsis

The nations of Latin America came into being without a strong sense of national purpose and identity. In The Invention of Argentina, Nicholas Shumway offers a cultural history of one nation's efforts to determine its nature, its destiny, and its place among the nations of the world. His analysis is crucial to understanding not only Argentina's development but also current events in the Argentine Republic.

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Customer Reviews

Verte good !

An excellent guide to understanding Argentina. It shows how today's main tensions were present since the chaotic inception of Argentina.

Good compresion of history, but will all the limitations of such concentration of events.

This well written book is an analysis of how 19th century Argentines developed a sense of national identity. Shumway focuses on the writings and lives of a number of important Argentine intellectuals, which is less restrictive than it sounds as several of these individuals were important political figures as well. Shumway points out that the collapse of the Spanish Empire resulted a number of embryonic states that lacked any prior national traditions. The subsequent emergence of national identity was partly a deliberate act of creation and partly a result of contingent events. In Argentina,

Shumway describes the emergence of 2 competing versions of nationhood rooted strongly crucial (and persistent) historical realities.The first was a version of Argentine nationhood based on Argentina as a neo-Europe, justifying the political dominance of Buenos Aires, looking to Britain, France, Germany, and the USA for models, committed to "free trade" and the de facto dominance of the Argentine economy by Britain and a Buenos Aires based elite, and a highly elitist version of politics. In large part due to the eventual success of Buenos Aires in dominating Argentine politics and its economy, important aspects of this ideology became the official version of Argentine history and national feeling. Shumway describes the alternative version as at least partly a reaction to the official, elitist, Buenos Aires based ideology. This version emphasized populism, the importance in Argentine history of the provinces and their local leaders (caudillismo), an emphasis on native Argentine traditions (gauchisme), and certain amount of economic nationalism and xenophobia. Shumway suggests that these rival conceptions of nationhood persisted into the 20th century, contributing significantly to many of the traumas of 20th century Argentine history.One of the great dangers of this kind of analysis is the risk of projecting present problems back into the past. Shumway seems to do a good job of avoiding anachronistic judgements and analysis. He is quite careful to put these competing ideologies in context and points some of the positive and negative merits of both traditions. Several of the advocates of the official, elitist version of Argentine nationhood disdained the common people of Argentina but were also social reformers who attempted to increase access to education. The nationalist tradition favored xenophobia and glorified authoritarianism, something that was helpful to Peron. He is careful to point out that these versions don’t fall into convenient right-left categories. The nationalist tradition could be appropriated by the left as well as the right. Shumway clearly sees these competing traditions as independent forces in Argentine life well into the 20th century, in part because they were explicitly codified as competing versions of the past and the nation by generations of argumentative Argentine intellectuals. This is undoubtedly correct but their persistence likely also reflects their basis in fundamental features of Argentine life; its historically colonial status in the world economy, the conflicts between Buenos Aires and the provinces, and the class divisions of a highly unequal society.

This book represents a significant contribution for understanding that complex nation which is Argentina. This is a country that has moved from being one of the more advance nations of the world at the beginning of the XX century, to a country that currently has almost half of its population under the level of poverty. This book stresses that the different ways nineteenth century intellectuals

and leaders framed the idea of Argentina is a decisive factor to understand its historic development. These "guiding fictions", as the author calls them, continue to shape and inform the country's actions and concept of itself.Through a rigorous -but accessible- analysis, the book deals with the work of the most important writers and thinkers of nineteenth century Argentina, and their ideas and images of the nation. In this endeavor, the author is free from the ideological constrains and ties which characterized Argentine "official history" -as well as its revisionist counterpart. This allows the book to openly analyze some of the figures of the Argentine history and to point out their divergent ideological legacy. Particularly interesting is chapter 3 which -for many Argentineans- might represent a "discovering" of Artigas, and his contribution for the building of Argentina. Equally remarkable are chapter 8 on Sarmiento and chapter 9 on Mitre, which stress the exclusion and divisiveness that characterized part of their legacy to the country -even though this might be difficult to accept for some of my fellow citizens, it is historically based-.By the end of the book, the reader has the clear idea that it is difficult to understand Argentina, without understanding the different -and most of the time-, contrasting frames for imagining the country which are embedded in the old tensions between liberalism and nationalism, Unitarians and Federals, Buenos Aires and the provinces.In conclusion, this is an excellent book for any person interested in Argentina.

An unprejudiced look at the history of Argentina. Based on his theory of the "guiding fictions" which (true or not) usually provide the basis for the spiritual development of nations, Shumway shows that no such paradigms stood at the beginning of Argentina's history; in fact, contradictory guiding fictions developing along the way produced irreconcilable differences which still haunt today's society - Unitarians against Federalists, Liberals against Nationalists.Rather than analyzing the chronology of battles and governments (which, when the moment comes, are rather entertainingly disposed of), Shumway prefers to obtain his amazing insight from the writings of Argentina's national heroes, politicians, theoreticians and poets. The result is a history of histories which throws a new light on the country's evolution, its relationship with the United States and Europe and on its mysterious incapacity to fully belong to the first world. It even provides the interested reader with the method to keep reasoning on long after the book has ended (it only goes as far as the 1880's; the author has to be encouraged to write a second volume soon!).Highly recommended to anyone who wants to better understand Argentina and Latin America, especially the brainwashed by generations of "official" textbooks.

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