Male Narratives from the Margins of the Country of Immigrants: Two Norwegians in Argentina in the 1920s

María Bjerg

This chapter analyzes the personal narratives of two Norwegian immigrants who arrived in Argentina at the end of the 1920s, namely, the diaries of Ole Viborg Høiby and of his friend and fellow traveler, Ottar Enger, who also wrote a series of twenty-six letters addressed to his parents.1 At the beginning of their stay, the authors of those narratives worked for over half a year as hired laborers on a farm in the west of Buenos Aires province, and later they set out on a long journey to the Chaco salteño, a wooded area in Salta province in the far north of the country, where they found employment at the Standard Oil refinery.

In different registers, the accounts of Ole and Ottar describe the same migration but two different experiences; they enable a complementary reading as well as an independent one, and through both a “public” narrative (the letters) and an intimate one (the diaries)2 they provide access to the authors'
representations and subjectivity. Thus, the analysis of this migratory experience will address two interrelated dimensions. In the first narrative, the route of the migrants will be rebuilt so as to reflect on the capacity of agency, the role of social networks in market access, and the links between overseas migration and internal and seasonal migrations. The second narrative, focused on subjectivity, will address their motivations and wishes, along with their representations and the way the social and cultural contexts affected their choices and influenced their strategies.

The case of Ole and Ottar has some particulars that make its study interesting. The first one is that their overseas migration was followed by a number of moves within the Argentine territory, one of which was especially relevant. As is widely known, between the 1880s and the 1930 financial crisis the big cities and the rural world of the pampean-coastal area were the geographical spaces of reception and settlement for the majority of immigrants. Contrarily, other regions in the country, like the Chaco salteño, whose population was predominantly indigenous, Creole, and Bolivian, received only small contingents of European immigrants, and it was precisely in such a marginal region that Ole and Ottar’s journey led them.

Another singularity is the duration of Ole and Ottar’s stay. They arrived in Buenos Aires in February of 1927 and returned to Norway at the end of March 1928. Although their diaries and letters say little about why they emigrated, they enlarge upon the reasons for returning and the changing representations of Argentina formed by them at different moments of their stay.

The Argentine migration statistics show both the spectacular number of immigrants and the considerable percentage that returned. For example, in a broad period of time (1857–1914), and considering the whole of the immigration studies use a combination of immigrants’ personal narratives such as letters, diaries, journals, and memoirs. See for example Kerby A. Miller and Patricia Mulholland Miller, Journey of Hope: The Story of Irish Immigration to America (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001). Others are based only on diaries. See for example María Bjerg, El Mundo de Dorothea. La vida cotidiana en un pueblo de la frontera de Buenos Aires en el siglo xix (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2004).

For an analysis of the uses of personal narratives and the problem of subjectivity, see Mary Jo Maines, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, Telling Stories. The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

According to the national census in 1914, almost 80 percent of the immigrants lived in the city of Buenos Aires, the eponymous province, and the province of Santa Fe, whereas in the northwest of Argentina percentages fluctuate between 2 percent and 7 percent.