

A History in Motion: Popular Dances and Sexual Morality in Argentina.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, urban development creates in Buenos Aires and other main Argentine cities, a circuit of entertainment and sex. Its public is those thousands of European immigrants and urbanized criollos who will find, in ballroom dances, the possibility of pleasure and excitement, moving forward in this way towards a deeper socio-cultural integration in a permanently changing country.

Dance will become a means of socialization, as well as a reflection of the moral tensions in a country with more men than women. In coupling for dancing, men and women will let themselves be carried away not just by music. They will reveal, either covertly or scandalously, what society permits and forbids in matters of sexual morality. A history of social dance is, implicitly, a history of morality and behaviors, restrictions and rebellions, norms and misbehaviors.

In my book, History of dance. From milonga to disco, I approached Argentina's social dances from a diverse perspective, with an eye towards linking the evolution of popular music with the private life of the Argentines; the deployment of the dances' dexterities with the rituals of salons and dance floors; the life stories of old milongueros with the socio-cultural context in which those lives took place.

Shortly after beginning, I discovered that popular dance, without inspiring the fervor it did in either Brazil or Cuba, occupies a prominent place—and not just because of tango—in Argentine leisure time throughout the twentieth century. Social and moral tensions are exposed in public dances that also reflect some of the main changes in modern Argentina. For instance, the massive acceptance of tango represents the birth of a country in which the popular sectors will have increasing importance. On the other hand, internal migrations in the second half of the 1930s would have a strong cultural impact in Buenos Aires, with the arrival of folk dances of the peoples from the provinces (the “darkies” who will give their support to Peronism). In present day Argentina, burdened by a deep socio-economic crisis, the rebirth of tango as dance implies not just a temporary escape from daily sorrows but also a strong desire to affirm a collective identity in the midst of globalization, when the country's decadence has become commonplace in the discourse of economists and political scientists.

What I want to say is that a history of popular dances is not as minor or as innocuous as it might appear on first examination. Writing the history of corporal movements and the music that motivated them allows us not only to see the processes of the past from an alternative viewpoint, but also to view them in ways complementary to methods used more commonly by science. While researching the book, I found a phrase from the dance expert Gerald Jonas that helped me understand my own interest in a subject that most of my colleagues would immediately dismiss. In his book Dancing. The pleasure, power and art of movement, Jonas affirms that we only become conscious of all that our daily dances reflect of the values of the world in which we live, when we come into contact with a society where dances are substantially different from ours.

For most people, social dancing—from milonga to disco, from romería to rave, from the Sweet Sixteen party to the divorcees party—begins as sheer pleasure, as a ludic practice in which, with more or less enthusiasm,

depending on the individual and the circumstances, we let ourselves be carried away by music, drink, noise, and the friction of other bodies... Even in that ambience of joy and freedom, of enjoying the license of the party, what we do and with whom we do it has meaning, referring back to a social context, and it presents, often in an elliptical and subtle, the way in which a society functions, and what its values, expectations, desires, and prejudices are. It is obvious that tensions get released at parties, but very strict norms and coexistence premises are simultaneously adopted and accepted. From the first party dances of our life we learn many things: how to approach the opposite sex, how to conduct ourselves within our peer group, what can and what can't be done in that space, somewhere between the sacred and the pagan, called "the dance."

It is impossible for me to summarize in a brief presentation a whole century in motion. I invite you, instead, to review three periods or moments in twentieth century Argentina through dance and its environment: 1) the emerging years of tango as salon dance—with its provocative "body to body" stance, 2) the years of Argentine populism when society seemed to dance as a way of social celebration; and 3) the 1960s, with their violent rupture of traditions and daily norms, and the triumph of a youth culture that shows its rebelliousness by dancing in a fashion very different from its parents and grandparents.

The uneasiness of tango.

"Dance with moderation and you'll have good digestion," advises an illustrated calendar, urging a happy start to the year of 1902. In the "decent" dances of those years, there is predictable choreographed routine, and there are certain rules to which all must submit. "I don't want to see you dance more than one number with each young man," a patrician mother orders her daughter, around 1908. Years earlier, French traveler Jules Huret notes the weight of prejudices among certain Argentines: "If at a given party, a woman talks or dances frequently with a man, next day the whole wide world will talk about her in Buenos Aires."

In most of the contacts occasioned by dancing there seems to be a certain guarantee of disaffection. Some elderly people miss yesteryear's parties for small groups, at which couples would hide their couple-ness in the period's circular and indifferent dance figures. From the dawn of the twentieth century all the way up to the 1940s, young women go dancing with a carnet, or dance-card, that the institution or club has given them as a hand-held program of events. Listed there are the pieces the orchestra will perform. Music is specified by type or genre: waltz, lancero, polka... And next to the printed text is a dotted line for writing down the name of the lucky gentlemen. A nineteenth century object that will be in use at certain pompous dances until the end of the 1920s, the carnet is the intimate inventory of a night's social vicissitudes—perhaps of its amorous ones as well. Carnets preserve the memory of something as immaterial and ephemeral as dancing, but they also function as an instrument of control and as a safeguard of a single woman's virtue.

Without carnets, and at healthy distance from the immaculate salons, there are the academies and "peringundines" (cheap salons). There, the tango—which "good society" confronts only during the weeks of the Carnaval—is practiced, with profit, all year 'round. Old academies would have started halfway through the

nineteenth century, and during its last two decades they sprang up all over Buenos Aires' map. Those places, so different from the "Club del Progreso" or "Jockey Club," are spots where young women dance when they are asked or paid, inaugurating the lineage of "milonguitas" who will bring tears to the eyes of Carriego's literary sons. Commonly, many of these places double as concealed brothels...barely concealed, at that. During the 1930s and 1940s the academies will turn into practice halls and young people's socialization salons, where both good dancers and beginners go to polish their skills in order to shine at the next dance.

Finally, there are the "dancing houses," private homes turned into minimal salons, sort of female-named stages where tangoers meet. There are tangos until dawn in several of these "little houses," particularly in María's "La Vasca" and Laura's "La Morocha". From the end of the nineteenth century on, these places are true laboratories of tango as dance and as instrumental music. For three pesos an hour, the males in attendance take a chance, dancing with dancers trained by tango "madamas." Like willing geishas, the "pupils" are—generally speaking—good dancers who satisfy their clients. They usually want just to dance and drink, but the women are ready for whatever may come. They will obediently accept their partners' demands, albeit for a considerable salary-- about 5 pesos per hour. Social thieves, the most successful ones will have acquired a taste for getting to the party in a fashionable rented car, from which they exit as queens of the night. They are the first "muñecas bravas" ("fierce dolls") of Buenos Aires, as poet Enrique Cadícamo will later call them.

Some upper-class and incipient middle-class ladies will dare to taste selected adventures, but generally speaking, the partners of men who dance tango outside the home judiciously accept any masculine liberties that might occur, provided there is always discretion. Prostitution, academies, peringundines, restaurants, and beer bars of nightlife, tango: are these not the warranties of a stable married life? Men channel their sexual desires outside home. That is the way they have been educated. After all—according to many church voices--sex for pleasure within marriage is almost worse than its eager practice outside the home.

In the meantime, in places taken over by immigrants, whoever wishes to address tango as a peer must accept the spectacle of other dances: Spanish jota is a hit at the "Velódromo;" at "Pabellón de las Rosas" all rhythms have their turn, according to the director's whims. Tango is already popular, but it is not the only star. Dancing tango is not easy. Out of that semi-secluded nocturnal world the first heroes of "corte" and "quebrada" (tango steps) emerge. They are the ones who know how to dance, those who distinguish themselves and exercise a certain control over time and space. During the day they practice the new arabesques in machista complicity; at night they show off at the academy or some salon belonging to the Italian community—the most populous immigrant group in Argentina. Sometimes, the most skillful ones become professors without degrees. For them, to dance tango is to belong to the world of the night.. "Ignorance of the night's secrets was suffered as a physical disability," assures writer José S. Tallón when talking of his elders. "The violent joy of life, strident sexuality, impudent liberty burning at the outskirts' nights could be heard in their blood."

Everybody dances.

A time of “tango and jazz” the 1940s are years of strict observance of male and female behavioral norms—particularly female. In a social paradox, both the night and dance have been cultivated since the “roaring ‘1920s” but a woman alone at night can only be of dubious morality, with a gradation that goes from the prostitute who works on her own—brothels having been banned in 1936—to the bar-girl or taxi-girl at a dance or dance academy. Not even the more forward and independent middle class girls dare to ignore the night’s moral code, though some repudiate it vehemently.

Dancing, during the Perón administrations (1946-1955), is not exempt from the negative imagery that weighs down female nocturnal activities; especially since some of the prostitute population has moved into the dance halls. That is because dance is a place that keeps generating both fear and insecurity for women, regardless of how well known its organizers may be, or how familial the parties are, or how renowned the institution or club is.

Places of “ill repute” are the cabarets of “el Bajo” neighborhood—big ballrooms like “La Enramada” with call-girls in search of a “john,” and certain places like “El Avión de la Boca” or a “concealed place” that operates in Godoy Cruz. “It was something like today’s saunas,” remembers an old milonguero with a smile. “We would dance a couple of pieces, carelessly, not paying a whole lot of interest to the dance, and then we would go to a hotel right across the street. You had to have dough, for sure. Girls would charge, the hotel would charge... It was all set. Under those circumstances, dancing was an excuse, a nice excuse. A guy would save for the hotel, that was the big expenditure at the time.”

For their part, fiancés cannot go out without the company of a sister, aunt, or friend. The institution of the chaperone is thus consolidated—and it will last for many years. What is off limits to the couples is public space. When a couple exhibits itself on its own, it scandalizes. When not seen, it becomes the object of suspicion, but in any event, given the norms of those years, bad is not quite as bad as long as it remains invisible. As a 1946 “good manners” manual reads: “Do not put your fiancée in a compromising position in front of others by engaging in too-affectionate gestures. Malice and suspicion go far, and you will not be able to stop them, even if you want to, because the end of their journey is calumny.”

Curiously, dancing is the only place in the world where a couple, or two strangers, can touch and even be glued to each other without anyone being horrified. But dance, of course, has its rules. Generally speaking, dances of the 1940s repeat the conventions of the past, the main one regarding the attendance of single women at “dancing reunions.” They must go accompanied by their mothers and/or elderly sisters, who will strategically place themselves on the chairs surrounding the dance floor, constituting themselves as a brave occupation army. Its mission: to monitor the movements of civilians “of marrying age.”

The more attentive and solicitous the gentleman, the better he is. Some dancers are so delicate as to take their partner’s hand with a handkerchief—white, immaculate—to prevent perspiration from bothering the lady. There are no minor gestures at the dance, no accidents (at least, there should not be). For members of the club’s party commission, supervising the dancers’ behavior is, perhaps, the most difficult and unsympathetic job. Some clubs in the provinces send invitations to “trustful” ladies and girls “with good credentials:” the party should not end up in the hands of dubious women. Neighborhood’s endogamy is the ideal of many neighbors.

“Look, try a simpler dance, avoid those figures, if you’d be so kind. You have to realize that with that step, the lady doesn’t look good. Behave yourself, man,” and other similar phrases could be heard at parties. There are, in the meantime, the dance’s anteroom, the meeting codes: invitation at the table (the most daring technique, for if it fails, there’s a long road back among chairs and little tables), the head gesture followed by walking together to the dance floor, or more directly, the head gesture, with each partner reaching the dance floor on his or her own. This last method, however, is repudiated by good manners. It refers to the time of *compadritos*—small time gangsters. Women should be accompanied, both coming and going.

Sublimated sex, so sublimated, that under the best of circumstances the couple will end up on the future in-law’s couch, or at the classical hall (successor to the turn of the century’s fence). Dance finds its popularity between repression and minor weekend transgressions. From the chairs’ *cordon sanitaire*, mothers take pains not to lose sight of their daughters. They do not always succeed. And they do give up monitoring the center of the dance floor—the couples’ favorite spot for “chapar”/heavy petting. At the time of tango and bolero, good dancers show off at the borders, while lovers choose the confusion at the invisible center of the dance floor.

Dancing during the 1960s.

The controls on private life are up-to-date—and up-to-night—under the dictatorship of general Onganía (1966-1970), with “modern dance” perceived as a cesspool of bad habits. Arrests are now more frequent—more than during Perón’s administration—and every “immoral” or “suspicious” act is forbidden. Authorities are now bothered less by prostitution and pimping than they were before. Now the issue—the problem—is youth. Their behavior, their disconcerting codes, their idea of sexuality, their ever increasing presence: that is the worry of the spurious association of military government and the most reactionary sectors of the Catholic Church. Even though Pierre Bourdieu, emphasizing the sign of youth as life’s golden time, claims that “youth is but a word,” it is nevertheless a word full of conflict, particularly in a society as restrained and repressed as Argentine society coming out of the 1940s. After 1955 in Argentina the relation between popular dances and sexual morality is structured around youth as a form of rebellion and a projection of cultural modernization.

Nevertheless, Argentine modernity—open now more than ever to “foreign” influences (a favorite term for *criollo* nationalism)—is hard to grasp. Once more, dancing at Buenos Aires’ main “bôites” has its own social regime. At times, in Afrika and Mau-Mau—two fashionable spots of the ‘60s—it is not easy to maintain interpersonal relationships in the dark for all the noise. The Argentina that adopts The Beatles and miniskirts has an active nightlife, even if it seems less interesting than during other periods. Buenos Aires leads the way in entertainment, with several bôites where new youth codes are established. The reign of solo dancing, psychedelic lights and eccentric clothing begins to establish a jurisdiction of “youth nights”—an unimaginable category for the tango and jazz years.

While this takes place under the spotlights of the exclusive night, most young women and men of the *Wincofón* era—a very popular record player of the time—make do with cheaper and more democratic entertainments, reproducing on

a smaller scale the rituals of modern dancing. For those under 18, there is no alternative: they must wait... and they will wait, dancing. The progressive fading of dances at traditional clubs and popular salons has forced young people to gather at their houses, with or without a DJ. The disco for teenagers—an '80s phenomenon—does not yet exist, and youth's subculture, if appetizing for leisure industries, is still inconsistent and spontaneous. Parties and dances are put together with minimal elements and a diffuse sense of identity. Girls are responsible for food—hardly anything more elaborate than chips or a quick cake—and the boys bring drinks. DJs of the period must face parents to negotiate the music's volume. Years later, the neighbors will complain. Technology moves forward.

During sunny afternoons, groups gather at a park or club, around the picnic basket, and since mid '60s, around the coveted "toca-toca" (portable record player), disc-man's premature and more social and/or public version. During the summer, at better-equipped clubs an afternoon corollary is the club's bar. After swimming, dancing. The body is thankful. Clearly, amorous relationships are still being born around music, even more so if the music is danceable. A newspaper report in "Primera Plana" in March 1963 reads: "They go out together, they dance together. Where? How? There's neither money for bôites, nor authorization. They get together at family's houses. That seems to be the program of most youth, across social classes; perhaps some movies, too. The favored music is songs and top hit numbers."

One thing is very clear from a pop music standpoint: norms have exploded in a thousand pieces. Old dancing and etiquette manuals become laughable. Old taboos about unaccompanied couples have lost their validity. Daughters do not go to parties with their mothers, because parties are organized around youth as an exclusive identity. Even if they wanted to, mothers would not dare gain access to discos. They can, of course, pick their daughters up at the end of the party, although this uncomfortable task usually befalls fathers. Adults cannot supervise what young people do at the party or outside of it, even when they are desperate to establish limits—limits quickly losing their old rigidity. When taboos regarding virginity become questionable, dancing's connotations loose drama and parents have no alternative but to resign themselves to not monitoring the types of contact between sexes that's arranged in the space of music and dancing bodies.

Youth's declaration of independence from the adult world is inscribed in their "noisy" music, which chases adults away. It will be so from now on. Soon there will be the time of disco, techno and dance music, with the multitudinous rave to bid farewell to the twentieth century. From a wide historical perspective, we can consider a long cycle of norms and private life extending from the '60s to today. Even when tango's return as dance brings back different age groups around the dance floor, it doesn't lose—generally speaking—its exclusive and tribal youthful sense. Even the most modest party will be a youthful celebration where all the "stage" will shine as a coded aesthetic object. Those who dance will do so as if they were taking part in an actual happening. Adults, as always, favor easel painting.

Those who used to go dancing with a specific tango orchestra, have become strangers to argentine nights. The chain of memories linking yester-nights with tonight is broken. The new night has no memory, does not recognize itself in urban mythologies, except for a few surviving remnants. It is not coincidental that

new forms of social dance tend to erase the frontiers between sexes. For many retreating tangueros, the most irritating aspect of the musical world after the arrival of twist is not the volume nor the stroboscopic lights, nor the dancing alone. The worst thing is that men, with their long hair and tight jeans are “effeminate-- they look like girls.”

A new ideology of body and love, deduced from new dance complicities? That seems to be what the ceremony of new encounters indicates. Nobody is boss on the dance floor. There are no “marks” of one body upon another. There is no circular motion either:: transit has become stilled. Old markings on the dance floor are no longer necessary; everything has become spontaneous and formless. “Good dancing” has given way to “free dancing.” In the ‘60s, dancing “in pairs” loses its classical symmetry. The body of the other is no longer the dancer’s mirror. That is perhaps the reason why he and she tend to turn their gazes to a real mirror. Thinking about these changes, French researcher Virginie Garandeau writes: “We keep getting together to dance, but the dance itself is becoming more solitary. Are we alone **with** others or **among** others? The question is there.”

I hope that now you also wish to read my book, History of Dance. From Milonga to Disco.

Thank you very much.