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Did Migrants Build the Welfare State? Migration as a Social Policy Driver in Early Twentieth-Century Uruguay

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1 Introduction

This chapter explores the links between two matter-of-course phenomena in Uruguayan historiography: the notion that nineteenth-century Uruguay was a “product of immigrants” and the often-repeated assumption that the small country became Latin America’s first welfare state in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The second claim is based on the widespread provision of public education and healthcare and on a vast number of labour reforms, most notably the introduction of the eight-hour working day in 1915. These reforms were introduced by a faction of the liberal Colorado Party coined *batllistas*, in reference to two-time president José Batlle y Ordoñez (1903–1907 and 1911–1915). Half a century earlier, the small republic of Uruguay had started to fully participate in the Great Atlantic Migration and experienced tremendous demographic growth.

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This chapter analyses one international interdependence—transatlantic migration—and traces and evaluates its manifold direct and indirect impacts on social policies in the “model country” Uruguay, as Batlle y Ordoñez famously framed it. After briefly summarising the pioneering social policies and the size and character of transatlantic migration from the second half of the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, three lines of impact will be examined: (a) how Uruguayan politicians framed health and labour legislation as a means to attract migrant workers and used the reforms in their recruitment of European migrants; (b) how migrants shaped the labour movement, which successfully demanded and negotiated social policies, and organised welfare in mutual societies; and (c) how second- and third-generation migrants formed part of social policy reform circles.

Whereas *batllismo* has attracted much scholarly interest, the history of European migration to Uruguay has not received similar attention (Goebel 2010, 192). The nexus between migration, the labour movement and *batllista* policies has been addressed in the literature (Finch 1981, 12–13), but in-depth studies only looked at two sides of the causal chain, in other words, either at the relation between migration and organised labour (e.g. Zubillaga 1997) or between labour and *batllismo* (Peterson 2014).

2 The *Batllista* Welfare State

What made *batllista* social policies so exceptional? Parts of the answer can be found in a list of progressive legislative pieces and in the comparatively close relation between organised labour and *batllista* politicians. Not only was Uruguay the first Latin American country to introduce the eight-hour working day in 1915, but the *batllistas* also enacted laws on the prevention of occupational accidents (1914), the obligation to provide chairs for women workers (1918),¹ the prohibition of night work in the

¹ More precisely, that year the “*Ley de la Silla*” (“Law of the chair”) was passed. It aimed at the special protection of women workers by obliging factory and shop owners to provide chairs for their female employees, so that the women could sit down during parts of their work.

food industry (1919), state pensions for the indigent aged and invalid (1919), and compensation for occupational accidents (1920). Additionally, the creation of a national public assistance agency in 1910 provided for public healthcare for the poor and framed this in terms of citizens' rights.

However, the *batllista* reformers were also talented myth-makers engaged in the creation of a narrative of exceptionalism that—just as the reforms themselves—should help to impress both contemporaries and later generations within and outside of Uruguay. The small republic's exceptional legislation in the early twentieth century not only included the fields of labour and health, but also vast public education reforms that had started during what is referred to as Uruguay's first modernisation period from the 1870s onwards. Importantly, *batllismo* also promoted the creation of a strong state economy, far-reaching secularisation, that was epitomised in the ban of religious symbols from public hospitals, and moral legislation such as the introduction of a divorce law in 1912. Altogether, this made for the country's "unique" and "unorthodox career" (Finch 1981, 1). Explanations for this uniqueness of the Uruguayan path in the early twentieth century emphasise the lack of opposition to Batlle y Ordoñez' modernisation programme in the setting of a very small country, and a favourable economic situation due to high prices for its main export products (Hentschke 2016, 25–26). However, scholars have also attributed *batllismo* to the large number of immigrants that arrived in the port of Montevideo since the early nineteenth century who as urban workers and members of the middle sectors were important supporters of Batlle's reform policies (Goebel 2010, 207; Finch 1981, 12–13).

3 A Country of Migrants

The arrival of mostly European immigrants and their interactions with the *criollo* population have shaped the small republic since its independence in 1830. From the 1850s until the 1920s, immigrants arrived in large numbers. Uruguay in the nineteenth century suffered from instability due to the country's position as a buffer state between the much larger neighbours Brazil and Argentina, and to armed conflicts between the

liberal Colorado Party and the conservative National Party (known as the *Blancos*). European immigrants are regarded as an important factor underlying the “first modernisation” of the country in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Some even argue “that Uruguay was built by people who ‘stepped off the boat’” (Arocena 2009, 108). Importantly, migration also shaped nation-building and influenced the long-lasting image of a cosmopolitan urban nation created in the early twentieth century.

With estimations that range from 273,000 to 579,000 migrants arriving between 1880 and 1930 (Goebel 2010, 197–98), the absolute number of immigrants was lower than in its larger neighbours. But:

(f)or much of the period from 1850 to 1930, during which most immigrants arrived, the ratio of newcomers per decade to resident population matched or even surpassed that of the United States, making Uruguay’s population grow sevenfold in the second half of the nineteenth century, the highest rate in Latin America by far. (Goebel 2010, 191)

At the peak, from the 1860s to the 1890s, about a third of the total population and half of the capital Montevideo’s inhabitants were foreign born, most of them in Italy and Spain. But while between 1850 and 1930, 70 percent of the migrants arrived from these southern European countries (Goebel 2010, 192), there was also an important number of Brazilians that settled in the border region, and a continuous bidirectional migratory movement across the Río de la Plata between the cities of Montevideo and Buenos Aires.

4 The Promotion of Migration to “The Most Favourably Situated Country”

From its beginnings, liberal Uruguayan politicians had pushed for European migration to their newly independent country. Just as Argentinean intellectual Juan Bautista Alberdi had famously claimed in 1852, Uruguayan liberals also considered that “to govern is to populate” (Oddone 1966, 10). But even though they were continuously concerned that Europeans would prefer to settle in Argentina or Brazil instead, state

efforts to attract migrants remained vague until the end of the nineteenth century. “Immigration to Uruguay was thus largely of a spontaneous type, with labour opportunities in trade, transport, artisanship and, to a much lesser extent, land acting as the country’s principal attractions” (Goebel 2010, 196). Furthermore, private initiatives in search of cheap labour established exploitive contraction systems (Oddone 1966, 25). Eventually, the first immigration law was passed in 1890, which can be considered a turning point in the history of migrant recruitment by the Uruguayan state.

When the liberal *batllistas* came to power in 1904, state-sponsored recruitment of immigrants became a top priority. Still in constant competition with its neighbouring countries, Uruguayan politicians and diplomats frequently highlighted economic opportunities, but also constantly used the country’s progressive social policy and labour legislation to highlight their country’s attractiveness as a destination for migration. Diplomats had played an important role in the promotion of migration to Uruguay since the 1860s (Oddone 1966, 25). By the early twentieth century, the recruitment of labour migrants had become a key task of Uruguay’s diplomatic personnel and they dedicated themselves to writing propagandistic material on their home country, be it books or newspaper articles (Zubillaga 1998, 71–73). One widely circulating example is the monograph *L’Uruguay au commencement du XXe siècle*, published in 1910 and written by Colorado politician and diplomat Virgilio Sampognaro. The book was published under the auspices of the Uruguayan committee for that year’s universal exhibition in Brussels, and Sampognaro, in his function as the committee’s secretary, aimed to “make a new people, that has since a dozen years taken up a development worthy of their attention, known in Europe” (Sampognaro 1910, under “Préface”, own translation). Importantly, a chapter dedicated to the situation of the working class underlined the book’s aim of attracting immigrant workers, promising that the Uruguayan state treated its workers favourably, paid them well, listened to their voices and offered them good food. In sum “the working class found in Uruguay a highly developed democratic surrounding” (Sampognaro 1910, 342, own translation).

Nationalist literature that described and praised Uruguayan characteristics boomed beyond the diplomatic sphere in the early twentieth

century. These “lay catechisms” were also mainly aimed at attracting immigrants (Caetano 2000, 17, own translation). In order to lure European migrants to the River Plate, the authors described Montevideo as a cosmopolitan and modern capital of a “civilised” European country that was situated among “barbaric” neighbours. This emphasis on Uruguay’s Europeanness was accompanied by the racist plot of a country free of natives: “It seems like Uruguayan soil is a region formed by pieces of different European countries. (...) Luckily no *indígenas* have existed in Uruguay for very many years, so that it is not necessary to civilize its inhabitants (...)” (Maeso 1910, 14; 304, own translation).

But, just as Sampognaro, most of these oeuvres emphasised the high standard of Uruguayan labour legislation. For example, a state-sponsored brochure on “Uruguay in 1915—a summary of its riches and progress” highlighted that:

the political organisation is in harmony with the most advanced democratic principles and day by day it is being rounded out by new social laws which are making of Uruguay the most favourably situated country among the nations of the world. (Ministerio de Industria, Oficina de Exposiciones 1915, 22)

A further example for this kind of self-praise is the voluminous state-sponsored centennial publication from 1926, which also included a lengthy chapter on labour policies. It emphasised that “Uruguay has managed to pass America’s most complete labour legislation” and confidently stated that the small country was “going ahead of this century’s movement, in order to offer the fruits of its experience to the nations with more ancient cultures (...)” (Consejo Nacional de Administración 1926, 333, own translation).

Additionally, these texts also promoted the public welfare system. Here the authors carefully tried to praise assistance to the poor and sick, without creating the impression that poverty and sickness were widespread phenomena in affluent Uruguay. Hence, Carlos Maeso admitted that “in the middle of the richness of its privileged soil” Uruguay “also has its share of inhabitants that live in misery” in order to stress that “the miserable are not forgotten in Uruguay” (Maeso 1910, 173, own translation).

Likewise, in the before-mentioned brochure from 1915, the authors first emphasized that Uruguay “for natural reasons of soil and climate is one of the most healthful countries in the world as the demographic statistics clearly show in the low percentage of mortality” before praising “the public services of hygiene and medical attendance (for) hav(ing) reached the highest degree of development in conformity with the requirements of modern science” (Oficina de Exposiciones 1915, 140).

In essence, the review of the nationalist literature shows that the *batllista* governments tried to use their labour and welfare policies to attract immigrants. It is however far less clear how that strategy played out. Just as current debates on the welfare magnet effect suggest (Ponce 2019), a variety of factors shaped the decisions of European migrants. Clearly though, upon their arrival in Uruguay and contrary to what *batllista* myth-makers would want us to believe, migrant workers’ demands had been important for the formulation of labour and welfare policies since the mid-nineteenth century.

5 Migrants, the Labour Movement, and Labour Legislation

As early as the 1850s, migrant workers established mutual aid societies, which protected their members against social risks such as sickness, unemployment, and accidents. Some of these societies still exist today and constitute an important private pillar within the Uruguayan health-care system (Arocena 2009, 116). Nevertheless, the *mutualistas* and the unions that succeeded and accompanied them since the 1870s were also the place from where the government was pushed to introduce legislation in the workers’ favour (Wätzold 2015, 98). Both in Uruguay and Argentina most groups of organised labour followed anarchist ideas that had been carried over the “libertarian Atlantic” (Wätzold 2015) by their large share of Italian and Spanish members. But their militant knowledge travelled in various directions as highly mobile anarchists often crossed the Atlantic more than once and repeatedly agitated on both shores of the River Plate. Authors who study specific migrant communities have

argued that radical ideas within the Uruguayan workforce emanated from specific publications from the Iberian Peninsula (Zubillaga 1997, 103–05) or Italian newspapers such as *L'Agitatore* (Peterson 2014, 19) respectively. This serves as a background to understanding why Uruguayan sociologist Felipe Arocena framed the introduction of the eight-hour working day in 1915 as a “direct consequence” of Italian militants within the Uruguayan labour movement (Arocena 2009, 116).

This interpretation suggests that the *batllistas* introduced the eight-hour working day to pacify agitating workers. But there is another facet to the story: that Uruguayan anarchists developed a peculiarly close relation to the state and labour legislation can also be interpreted as the successful result of labour action. Contrary to every other governor in the Atlantic world, José Batlle y Ordoñez maintained friendly relations with anarchist organisations and leaders. He famously opened Uruguay's doors when a large number of immigrant anarchists were expelled from Argentina in 1902. And when Uruguay witnessed its first general strike in 1911, the president expressed his support (Peterson 2014, 136–37). Labour bills had first been discussed in Uruguayan parliament in 1903. Initially, anarchist newspapers refrained from commenting on the legislative proposals, reflecting anarchist distrust in the state (Peterson 2015, 121–22). By 1910 however, when José Batlle y Ordoñez was about to start his second presidency, “a new and peculiar ideology we may call anarcho-batllismo” (Peterson 2015, 125) emerged. This anarchist faction supported Batlle's candidacy and saw him at the forefront of progressive forces within Uruguay, not least thanks to his strong anticlericalism. However, those who were leading the anarchist sections in support of Batlle were not workers, but well-known intellectuals instead. Most of them had been born in Spain and were actively engaged in European and Argentinean political circles as well (Peterson 2015, 125–130). When labour laws finally started to pass parliament from 1914 onwards, they came with so many flaws that the close relations between *anarcho-batllistas* and the state did not prevent major labour unrest. The most violent protests arose in 1915 after the introduction of the eight-hour working day. Still, instead of rejecting the state's role as their ally, workers then fought

to improve the law (Peterson 2015, 138). In this endeavour they interacted with another group of immigrants: those who formed the core of the young *batllista* reformers.

6 *Batllista* Reformers: The Second Generation

As stated earlier, in the early twentieth century migrants not only formed large parts of the urban Uruguayan working class, but also of the emerging middle sectors. From there emerged the men and women who developed the labour, health, and welfare reforms in the growing *batllista* state apparatus. While a proper middle class was not yet formed, certain career paths—most notably a university degree in law or medicine—showed the societal way upwards. At the same time, these professions were the liberal politicians’ “anteroom of politics and hideaway for difficult days” (Barrán and Nahum 1979, 250, own translation)—and almost all politicians were liberals. Their Colorado Party had been in power since 1865 and was synonymous with the country’s political class, while leaving conservative interests untouched until José Batlle y Ordoñez came to power. Whereas the highest-ranking Colorado politicians since the nineteenth century—including Batlle himself—came from a small number of families with colonial roots, the young *batllista* political circle was primarily comprised of second- and third-generation immigrants, mostly of Italian, but also of Spanish and French ancestry. The political opposition would use this demographic fact to reproach *batllistas* as “agitating foreigners” (Barrán and Nahum 1979, 100).

Domingo Arena (1870–1939), a close advisor and friend to Batlle and one of the principal *batllista* thinkers and policy-makers, had even been born in Italy. His biography prototypically illustrates the migrants’ way up. He came to Uruguay at age seven, living with his Italian parents in the interior of the country, where his father worked as a cobbler. Young Arena would then move to Montevideo, received university degrees in both pharmacy and law, and entered the world of liberal politics through

Batlle's newspaper *El Día*. Among his close political allies were Pedro Manini Ríos, Francisco Ghigliani, and José Serrato—all sons of Italian immigrants and important liberal figures throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. The vast list of *batllista* reformers with Italian parents further includes the main architect of the national public assistance—José Scosería—and famous feminist and social reformer Paulina Luisi.

7 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the international interdependence of transatlantic migration as a possible explanatory factor for the early and broad social policy reforms in *batllista* Uruguay (1903–1933). The brief analysis could show that: (1) social policies were used to attract migrants, (2) the Uruguayan labour movement—largely composed of migrant workers—was important for the introduction of social policies, and (3) many important *batllista* reformers were the children of European immigrants. As could be seen, European migrants and their descendants carried labour demands and social policy ideas back and forth over the Atlantic and the River Plate. However, migration is certainly only one among a series of factors that can explain Uruguay's social policies in this timeframe. Moreover, neighbouring countries received similarly large numbers of immigrants without developing the same social policies. This makes it only more surprising that the early migration–social policy nexus has not yet been studied in depth for neither Uruguay nor the Cono Sur region—a worthwhile endeavour as this chapter has aimed to argue.

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