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The Arrival of the Electric Streetcar and the Conflict over Progress in Early Twentieth-Century Montevideo*

ANTON ROSENTHAL

Abstract. The inauguration of electric streetcar service by two foreign-owned companies in Montevideo in 1906 set off an intense debate between the city's elite and its anarchist workers over the nature of progress. The streetcar became a contested symbol of modernity as the elite attempted to dictate the terms of a new urban order. Anarchists countered with an alternative vision of progress that emphasised social equality, education and liberty, and they competed for the sympathy of the middle class which grew increasingly ambivalent towards the streetcar. Trolley workers resisted a new system of discipline at the workplace and eventually led the city's first general strike, with broad public support.

The opening of the twentieth-century in Montevideo is clearly marked by two public events. First, in the last two months of 1906 an electric streetcar service was inaugurated in this quickly evolving metropolis, the third largest capital city in South America. Tens of thousands of people participated in a series of public spectacles which opened the lines of two competing companies. These events provided a public forum for the elite to extoll the virtues of a foreign technology and entrepreneurship. The inaugurations also redefined the social space of the city by reducing perceived distances between beaches, parks, neighbourhoods and commercial districts, and symbolically demonstrated that the new urban order was in the hands of a political hierarchy which controlled the streets as well as the future of modern Montevideo. The inauguration of electric streetcar service was enveloped in an elite-dominated discourse on 'progress' which was articulated in speeches by dignitaries and politicians and in editorials in the popular press.

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The view that Montevideo had a future without limits linked to a linear and improving history which was driven by new technology did not go unchallenged. It was vociferously countered by anarchists, artisans, industrial workers and elements of the middle class whose interests merged over the issues of inadequate streetcar service and the abuse of the rights of streetcar workers by foreign companies. This debate over progress and the future of the city raged until it boiled over in the *second* major public event of the century, the city's first general strike. Originating not coincidentally on the new streetcar system, the walkout by conductors, motormen, line crews and shop mechanics effectively shut down the capital city for several days and disrupted public transport for several weeks in May 1911.¹ The strike and the counter-progressive ideology that supported it permanently damaged the usefulness of the *eléctrico* as an elite symbol for progress in Montevideo.

This article traces the debate over progress from the 1906 electrification of the streetcars up to the 1911 general strike, in order to challenge certain prevailing notions in the historiography of twentieth-century Uruguay and Latin America as a whole. First, it demonstrates that progress was not a dead issue by 1900 in Uruguay. While many of the key battle lines had been drawn in the nineteenth century with the coming of railroads and foreign capital, the elite version of progress engendered a new form of opposition which was both urban and modern, not the rural 'folk' of E. Bradford Burns's schema of conflict for the previous century.² The new actors – workers, anarchists and some disaffected professionals – fought very fiercely against the urban elite in the early 1900s over the future shape of the city. José Pedro Barrán, the most influential Uruguayan historian of his generation, has claimed that a 'civilised sensibility' vanquished an earlier 'barbaric sensibility' in matters of labour, sexuality and death by 1900.³ This argument, heavily influenced by Michel Foucault, looks toward the defeat of 'Luddite' rural insurrectionaries in 1904 and effectively denies much historical agency to the urban workers and anarchists of the early twentieth-century, holding that the main battle for the destiny of Uruguay had already been waged. The present article counters that view by demonstrating that the elite was not able unilaterally to determine the urban social order in Montevideo nor

¹ For details of the 1911 general strike see Anton Rosenthal, 'Streetcar Workers and the Transformation of Montevideo: The General Strike of May 1911', *The Americas: A Quarterly Review of Inter-American Cultural History* (forthcoming in 1995).

² E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1980).

³ José Pedro Barrán, *El Disciplinamiento (1860–1920)*, *Historia de la sensibilidad in el Uruguay*, vol. II (Montevideo, 1991), p. 33.

did it successfully instil a unified discipline among the popular classes before the end of the last century. Furthermore, the opposition from the urban working class was significant, revolutionary, and did not follow the parameters of the elite discourse on progress and civilisation. Espousing an anarchism derived largely from French, Spanish and Russian activists, after 1905 Montevideo's artisans and workers slowly elaborated an alternative vision of progress which emphasised social improvement through the redistribution of wealth, the decentralisation of authority and the eventual overturning of capitalism.

Secondly, this article places the streetcar at the cultural and economic centre of the history of modern Montevideo. It argues that the streetcar was a tool used by the elite to attempt to reorder public space and to modify the behaviour of the city's 'popular classes'. It portrays the trolley as more than simply an efficient conveyance, but as a machine which encapsulated antagonistic ideologies within its daily operation and which became an arena where class conflict was continually waged. The article evaluates the streetcar as a changing urban symbol of modernity which acted as a unifying and socialising force for waves of immigrants from Europe and the Uruguayan interior. In so doing, it counters the tendency evident in recent studies to look at Montevideo as a series of distinct and largely unconnected neighbourhoods.⁴ This project also follows the lead of James Scobie regarding the importance of the electric streetcar to urban history, a view which has been largely ignored by other historians of the region.⁵

In conjunction with this focus on the streetcar, the study also demonstrates the usefulness of examining the daily experiences of a single occupational group, namely streetcar workers, for understanding the formation of both intra- and inter-class alliances in a socially fluid environment as well as the influence of ideology on broad social movements, such as anarchism on organised labour. It shows how trolley workers drew on anarchist currents popular within the labour movement to understand their new workplace, and also how they drew on public antipathy to the streetcar companies to launch a strike which effectively undercut the claims of the elite to define the terms of 'progress'. In this way, the study offers an avenue to micro-level cultural studies of

⁴ The City of Montevideo has recently published a series of books on Montevideo's neighbourhoods including Aníbal Barrios Pintos and Washington Reyes Abadie, *Paso Molino, El Prado y sus alrededores* (Montevideo, 1993). Similarly the Fundación Banco de Boston has issued a series focused on regions of the city, including Fernando O. Assunção and Iris Bombet Franco, *La Ciudad Vieja* (Montevideo, 1990). Both series are picture books and tend to feed the widespread nostalgia for Montevideo in earlier decades.

⁵ James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910* (New York, 1974).

Uruguayan labour which could serve as an alternative to the prevailing historiography that has focused on confederations, unions, legislation, party alliances and the chronological development of the movement as a whole.⁶ In a broader context, the article also demonstrates the importance of transport workers in moulding Latin American history by serving as the focal point of working class opposition to elite plans for development. This is in direct contrast to the structuralist work of Charles Bergquist who concentrates almost exclusively on export workers to explain the impact of labour on the region's twentieth-century history.⁷

Social Order in Early Montevideo

In order to appreciate the centrality of the streetcar to the debate over progress in Montevideo, it is necessary to have a picture of daily life and spatial boundaries in the city at the turn of the century. Prior to the advent of the electric streetcar, Montevideo had been a relatively quiet city for a national capital. The old port area, which had been constructed during colonial times, was made up of narrow cobblestone streets and served as a mixed commercial and residential area for professionals, retailers, and artisans. It was dominated by the activity of the customs house. Along the waterfront was a seedy zone known for gambling, drinking, smuggling and prostitution.⁸ Together these formed the Ciudad Vieja, within the boundaries of the old colonial city. A more modern zone, the 'Centro' or new central business district, developed approximately a mile to the east of the port, branching off from the main avenue of 18 de Julio. Along this wide, tree-lined artery, the owners of banks and commercial houses sought to redefine their city image by employing French and Italian architectural styles in the construction of mansions and tall retail buildings. A few blocks to the north, in 1897, an enormous European-style railroad station was constructed, serving as the main link with the country's interior. A few blocks to the south, the waves of mostly Spanish and Italian immigrants who came to Uruguay from the 1860s until the First World War, found places to live in dilapidated and unhealthy *conventillos*.

⁶ See for example Lucía Sala de Touron and Jorge E. Landinelli, '50 años de movimiento obrero uruguayo', in Pablo González Casanova, coordinator, *Historia del movimiento obrero uruguayo* (Mexico, 1984), pp. 251–329; Francisco R. Pintos, *Historia del movimiento obrero del Uruguay* (Montevideo, 1960); and Germán D'Elía and Armando Miraldi, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero en el Uruguay: Desde sus Orígenes Hasta 1930* (Montevideo, 1984). In contrast, Carlos Zubillaga and Jorge Balbís emphasise workers' daily lives, ideologies and their press in their four-volume history of organised labour which covers the period prior to 1905, *Historia del movimiento sindical uruguayo* (Montevideo, 1985–92).

⁷ Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America* (Stanford, 1986).

⁸ Antonio Ferrán, *La Mala Vida en el 900* (Montevideo, 1967), p. 9.

The process of urban renewal and modernisation in Montevideo was far from complete by 1900. Although there was an attempt to emulate European capitals with the adoption of telephone service, gas and electric lighting, the rural character of the city still persisted. Vendors of different nationalities and both genders roamed the streets, selling a variety of goods and services. They were surrounded by horse-carts carrying bread, beer and agricultural products, and by small horse-drawn trams carrying middle-class passengers. Milk was still delivered to residences from dairies that existed within the city limits. In fact, the line between urban and rural, so sharply drawn in modern cities, remained somewhat blurred in Montevideo. One of the downsides of this quaintness was that because of Montevideo's heavy reliance on horses and mules for transportation, its streets smelled greatly of animal urine and excrement. There were nearly 800 horses in the service of just one of its seven streetcar lines, and each of those could drop an average of ten pounds of excrement daily.⁹

Beyond this impingement of the countryside, which ran counter to the Montevideo elite's desire for a cosmopolitan capital during the '*belle époque*', the social disorder which so troubled the Positivists was apparent everywhere in the city. In the first twelve years of the century, strikes were conducted by many groups of workers, including seamstresses, railroad workers, milkmen, stevedores, garbage collectors, bricklayers, bakers, shoemakers, tailors, typographers, nurses and trolley workers.¹⁰ There were significant protests over the rising cost of bread in 1906, and over the execution in Spain of the anarchist educator Francisco Ferrer in 1909. There were also rent protests in various neighbourhoods and muckraking journalists exposed the unhealthy conditions in the city's 1,130 *conventillos*, most of which existed in the downtown area.¹¹ After 1900 diseases continued to ravage the port city, including periodic outbreaks of smallpox, rabies, typhoid and black plague. In 1909 a scarlet fever epidemic, one of the worst in the city's history, resulted in the closing of schools for an extended period and the introduction of mass, forced vaccinations, particularly among the poor.¹² But the main killers were respiratory ailments such as tuberculosis, bronchitis and pneumonia that thrived in the damp and dark *conventillos*.¹³

⁹ *La Democracia*, 14 March 1907, p. 2. I am indebted to Alan Black, Professor of Urban Design at the University of Kansas, for the statistic on excrement.

¹⁰ Universindo Rodríguez Díaz, *Los Sectores Populares en el Uruguay del Novecientos: Primera Parte (1907-1911)* (Montevideo, 1989), p. 66; Carlos Rama, *Historia Social del Pueblo Uruguayo*, (Montevideo, 1972), p. 109; *Uruguay Weekly News*, 6 March 1910, p. 1.

¹¹ Barrán and Nahum, *El Uruguay del Novecientos*, pp. 217-18. For a description of conditions in the *conventillos* see Octavio Morató, *Problemas Sociales* (Montevideo, 1911), pp. 59-63.

¹² *Uruguay Weekly News*, 12 September 1909, p. 1.

¹³ Barrán and Nahum, *El Uruguay del Novecientos*, p. 59.

Similarly, crime appeared to some journalists as an epidemic. In 1905, Montevideo suffered more than one unsolved robbery each day, and there were constant complaints of crime in the press up until World War I.¹⁴ The city fathers attempted to deal with this scourge by professionalising the police force, but this process was slowed by the city's policy of paying its guardians of public order an annual salary of only 360 pesos.¹⁵ Consequently, and particularly at night, the streets of the city remained in the terrain of chance, vice and misadventure, the enemies of modernism's order and progress.

By 1908 when Uruguay took its third national census, Montevideo had slightly over 300,000 residents, nearly triple the figure of only 22 years before.¹⁶ This rapid growth made it a sizeable capital, besieged by the modern problems of inadequate housing and unemployment. Barrán and Nahum estimate that about 40,000 Europeans migrated to the city from 1903 to 1916, and that about 30 per cent of the city's residents in 1908 were foreign-born.¹⁷ These immigrants constituted one-third of Montevideo's industrial workers, labouring in the city's hundreds of industrial enterprises.¹⁸ These businesses included newly erected meat-packing plants, breweries and distilleries, textile plants, mills, furniture and match factories as well as scores of small workshops. According to historian Raúl Jacob, 'by 1908 Uruguayan industry was in the middle of the road between the artisan shop and the factory'.¹⁹ Yet travellers and journalists continued to see Montevideo as a sleepy town, certainly in comparison to the more cosmopolitan Buenos Aires. Georges Clémenceau, the French statesman, remarked after a brief stay:

the demands of a civilisation as yet untouched by decadence leave little energy

¹⁴ *Uruguay Weekly News*, 18 February 1906, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Revista de Policía*, 1906, vol. II, no. 6, p. 5. An editorial in the same issue complained that the lack of adequate pay resulted in few people making police work a career; pp. 1–2. This compares with wages of 60–80 pesos monthly for locomotive engineers, 35–52 pesos for match factory workers, 30–35 pesos for telephone workers and 35–38 pesos for trolley conductors and motormen (from Eduardo Acevedo, *Anales Históricos del Uruguay*, Tomo V (Montevideo, 1934), p. 480). The peso was roughly on par with the US dollar during this period.

¹⁶ D'Elía and Miraldi, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero en el Uruguay*, p. 29 and Milton Schinca, *Boulevard Sarandí*, Vol. I, fourth edn. (Montevideo, 1978), p. 122.

¹⁷ Barrán and Nahum, *El Uruguay del Novecientos*, p. 105, 169.

¹⁸ Raúl Jacob, *Breve historia de la industria en Uruguay* (Montevideo, 1981), pp. 71–72, gives the number of 'industrial enterprises' in 1908 as 1,356; however Juan Rial, 'Estadísticas históricas del Uruguay, 1850–1930' (mimeo, Montevideo, 1980), p. 94, points out that in Montevideo these averaged only 11.2 workers. The speed of industrial growth in the first decade of the twentieth-century can be gleaned from the fact that there were only 700 industrial enterprises in all of Uruguay in 1900. Carlos M. Rama, *Obreros y anarquistas*, Enciclopedia Uruguaya Historia Ilustrada, no. 32 (Montevideo, 1969), p. 27.

¹⁹ Jacob, *Breve historia de la industria en Uruguay*, p. 73.

for pleasure that must be sought elsewhere than on the strait path... It is sufficient for me to set down what came under my notice: happy homes and regular habits; a tranquil enjoyment of a life of virtue.²⁰

While not devoid of vice, Montevideo was in fact a place of simple entertainments that co-existed with a slowly developing interest in theatre and classical music, pushed by the upper classes. Popular entertainments included soccer, the lottery, a 'Parisian' diviner with a special magnetic talisman, 'gypsies' running fortune-telling scams, a biograph which attracted the notice of the Municipal Board for alleged indecency, public bathing and the annual carnival which drew many tourists from Buenos Aires.²¹

With so many immigrants entering the country from the mid nineteenth century to the First World War, Uruguayan society was fairly fluid. Early immigrants, while largely excluded from politics, were often able to acquire property, and by 1889 nearly three-quarters of the merchants in Montevideo were foreigners.²² Using figures for rent paid and income earned in 1908 and 1913, Barrán and Nahum have outlined a fairly stratified Montevidean society. The upper class, numbering about 3,700 families or 5 per cent of the population, was composed of bankers, industrialists, company managers, lawyers, absentee ranchers and large merchants. They earned 30 per cent of the income, paid 50 times the rent of the poor, and lived mostly in the Ciudad Vieja, along Avenida 18 de Julio in the Centro, and in the suburbs of the Prado and Pocitos. The industrialist sector developed out of an immigrant base of Spanish, Italian and French artisans and a Catalan-Italian commercial sector. The middle classes, somewhat vaguely defined as small merchants and those private and public sector employees who earned salaries rather than wages, constituted about 40 per cent of the population and lived in a variety of neighbourhoods on the edges of the Centro and stretching into various suburbs. They constituted a significant part of the users of the new electric streetcars. The so-called 'popular classes' were an amalgam of industrial workers, street vendors, day labourers, servants, police and soldiers which comprised 55 per cent of the population, earned 15 per cent of the total income and lived in *conventillos* in the centre and humble houses and apartments in suburbs and neighbouring towns that were eventually incorporated into the city through the expanding trolley network.²³

²⁰ Georges Clémenceau, *South America To-day* (New York and London, 1911), pp. 22-3.

²¹ *Uruguay Weekly News*, 14 April 1907, p. 9; 1 August 1909, p. 22.

²² *La Tribuna Popular*, 3 June 1907, p. 5.

²³ Barrán and Nahum, *El Uruguay del Novecientos*, pp. 22, 172, 178, 181, 185, 215, 219, 223-7, 235; Carlos Real de Azúa, *La Clase Dirigente*, *Nuestra Tierra* No. 34 (Montevideo, 1969), p. 32.

Electrification and the Elite

When the electric streetcar finally came to Uruguay in November 1906, it was received with equal parts relief and wonderment by this varied citizenry. For nearly a decade, the initiative to replace Montevideo's forty-year-old horse-car system with larger, faster, quieter and cleaner electric cars had been blocked by national politicians.²⁴ Meanwhile Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo electrified their lines, and La Sociedad Comercial and La Transatlántica, the local affiliates of British and German transport companies, set about gobbling up Montevideo's horse-car lines in anticipation of an eventual monopoly of the electrified system. In 1905, when construction of the new lines finally commenced, one newspaper lamented that

It is a great mark of progress, which our capital should have enjoyed for some time, but because of a spirit lacking confidence, a spirit of doubt, we always have to be the last in these things.²⁵

The eventual arrival of the electric streetcar in 1906 was celebrated with a great fanfare by the city's upper and middle classes. The daily and weekly press extolled the wonders of the new trams and wrote glowingly of the progress that they symbolised. *La Tribuna Popular*, one of the most widely read dailies, noted that with the coming of the *eléctrico* Montevideo could with justice be called a 'modern and progressive city'.²⁶ *La Democracia*, an opposition paper, characterised electrification as 'a true step in the path of progress' which situated Montevideo 'at the level of the principal European capitals' and a few weeks later referred to the *eléctrico* as 'an emissary of civilisation'.²⁷ *La Razón*, another establishment daily, saw it as 'one of the greatest elements of progress that our city has realised in these recent years'.²⁸ *The Montevideo Times*, a commercial newspaper for the English-speaking community, echoed elite sentiments about land usage in looking towards a future when

with improved means of transit the suburbs will expand more rapidly than ever... the present suburban places of recreation, being more freely visited, will

²⁴ They wrangled over the duration of the city's 75-year concessions to two foreign streetcar companies, and argued whether this new form of transportation would become outmoded too soon. *Diario de Sesiones de la H. Cámara de Representantes*, Tomo 163, Año 1900 (Montevideo, 1901), pp. 475 and 492-4; Eduardo Acevedo *Anales Históricas*, p. 312. ²⁵ *La Tribuna Popular*, 2 February 1905, p. 1.

²⁶ *La Tribuna Popular*, 20 November 1906, p. 2.

²⁷ *La Democracia*, 20 November 1906, p. 2, 18 November 1906, p. 1 and 3 January 1907, p. 1. ²⁸ *La Razón*, 20 November 1906, p. 1.

improve and increase in number, thereby also increasing the attractions for visitors; and more families of all classes will permanently make up their residence in the suburban districts, relieving the pressure on the centre (it is to be hoped) bringing down the present very high rents.²⁹

This equation of progress and urban expansion presaged the development of suburbs eastward along the coast from Pocitos and northward from the Prado to the town of Villa Colón, allowing the city to extend out from the port a distance of approximately 10–12 kilometres by the 1930s.

The electric cars of La Comercial actually had two inaugurations, each with a different class character. On 19 November, the city's rich and famous, dressed in suits and top hats or bowlers, toured La Comercial's new power plant and rode twelve new streetcars (bedecked in the flags of Uruguay, Great Britain and the United States) from the business district to the Pocitos beach. The audience for this event was the middle class, which thronged the route, applauding and behaving as if watching the annual carnival parade. As the trolleys passed the stock exchange, fireworks were set off and along the route flags were flown from chalets and 'fine properties' in the newly developed Pocitos suburb.³⁰ As ritual, this first inauguration served to make visible the city's social hierarchy and to show who controlled transport technology and, by extension, the streets.

The city fathers made grand speeches both at the new power plant and at a luncheon held at the trolley company's new beach hotel. These concerned the projected growth of Montevideo, the miracle of British technology, and the benefits for all social classes which this sentinel of twentieth-century civilisation would bring. Dr Claudio Williman, Minister of Government, La Comercial attorney and stockholder, and the next President of Uruguay, pronounced the streetcar a 'new factor of progress' which the republic would incorporate into its 'economic and social movement', and which was made necessary by 'reasons of hygiene and economic order'.³¹ He also claimed that the trolley would facilitate the building of new houses and neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city for the working class, implying that the centre-city *conventillos* could then be cleared for more development. Federico Vidiella, President of the Municipal Board, presented a history of the early resistance to the horse tram, and the improvements and development which it had brought to the city, before referring to the 'days of adventure and prosperity without limits' which now lay before Montevideo and its electric streetcars.³²

²⁹ *The Montevideo Times*, 21 November 1906, p. 1.

³⁰ *Uruguay Weekly News*, 25 November 1906, p. 2.

³¹ *La Razón*, 20 November 1906, p. 1.

³² *La Tribuna Popular*, 20 November 1906, p. 2.

Later that week, at the most prestigious club in the city, members of the elite met for a private banquet celebration where they joined in toasts that created a collective monologue on progress in Uruguay. These men included 'prominent politicians, bankers, merchants, representatives of public companies, engineers, doctors, lawyers, literary men, etc.' as well as diplomats from Europe and the United States and two members of the press corps.³³ Mr C. C. Lewis, the organiser and representative of the American contractor who had electrified the streetcar system, set the tone for the evening with this speech:

If any of us should be called upon to name that particular phase of social development which distinguishes the 19th and 20th centuries from preceding ones we would all without dissent admit that the tremendous strides made in the art of intercommunication and of transportation are those which are preeminently distinctive... Within the last century two manifestations of the forces of nature, steam and electricity, hitherto practically unknown have effected more radical changes in the social status and development of the human race than all other causes previously in effect.³⁴

Other voices followed, some invoking the benefits of free trade and economic prosperity that awaited a growing city committed to urban renewal, and others which bade a distinctly untearful farewell to the horse-drawn streetcar, now popularly referred to as *la cucaracha*. C. W. Bayne of the Central Uruguay Railroad noted approvingly that the trolleys would make possible the segmentation of the city by divorcing residential from commercial zones and making land in the central city too expensive for use as private housing.³⁵ Implicit in this redefinition of urban space was a new form of social control that the elite would exercise over the working class away from the workplace. Taken together, all of these speakers articulated a belief in the benefits of technology linked to capitalism, the possibility of unlimited growth, as well as the inevitable triumph of man over nature. Their words presented the distinct class perspective on progress which had developed out of organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Club Uruguay, the Jockey Club, and the Uruguayan Industrial Union, an employer's association dedicated to protectionism and resisting labour militancy.³⁶

³³ *Uruguay Weekly News*, 25 November 1906, p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 6.

³⁶ For the latter see, Jacob, *Breve historia de la industria en Uruguay*, pp. 69–70 and Carlos Zubillaga and Jorge Balbís, *Historia del movimiento sindical uruguayo*, vol. IV: *Cuestión social y debate ideológico* (Montevideo, 1992), pp. 101–8. Juan Cat, the manager of La Sociedad Comercial in Montevideo, was a member of the Union Industrial Uruguayana: *El Tranvía*, vol. 1, no 14, 15 November 1911, p. 3. C. Real de Azúa also mentions socialisation of the wealthy on the beaches of Pocitos, on family trips to Europe and through sports such as rugby, golf and hunting rather than soccer in *La Clase Dirigente*, p. 48.

The Public Response: Fear and Ambivalence

The inaugural ride of November 1906 turned out to be simply an exhibition for public consumption. The real inauguration of daily service was timed to coincide with another ritual, the annual blessing of the waters at the tourist beach at Pocitos on 8 December. Occurring on a holiday, this event was mobbed by thousands of people, jamming street corners and stations in quest of a ride on one of the shiny new cars. At various times throughout the weekend the police had to be called in to restore order on the streetcars as riders refused to budge from their seats or perches on the platforms. People gave up their siestas, left their lunches, forgot their errands and stood on street corners in the rain for hours in pursuit of places on the new cars.³⁷ Several newspapers mentioned that all of Montevideo seemed to be in motion, out on the streets, and even the old horse cars were filled with passengers attempting to get to the new electric streetcar lines.³⁸ On the first day alone, *La Comercial* sold 40,000 tickets to its 'attraction'. From accounts in the press, it is clear that these celebrants were mostly from the middle class, some opting to spend several pesos to ride the cars for hours on end, amounts beyond the reach of most of the city's workers.³⁹

Over the next five years, other lines were electrified throughout various parts of the city, creating a system which helped to unify the capital and to bring a shared experience of space to a large sector of its inhabitants. The inauguration of the *La Transatlántica* network on 2 June 1907 included the participation of the nation's president and an elite entourage, carried in 'elegant' streetcars, imported from Germany.⁴⁰ This parade had the distinction of being one of the few events in city history commemorated by a postcard.⁴¹ With the two companies operating somewhat complementary services, riders found it possible to journey long distances in a short time and to acquire knowledge of a range of neighbourhoods.

These two inaugurations of the *eléctrico* marked the high tide of

³⁷ *La Tribuna Popular*, 9 December 1906, pp. 6–7 and 10 December 1906, p. 7.

³⁸ *Montevideo Times*, 11 December 1906, p. 1.

³⁹ *La Tribuna Popular*, 10 December 1906, p. 7. *La Mosca* carried a cartoon of a full tram carrying male passengers dressed in long coats, ties, and top hats while the ladies wore large hats with feathers; third week of December, 1906, pp. 2–3. *La Tribuna Popular* ran a story about a young man who rode from early morning to late at night, spending almost four pesos in the process, 9 December 1906, pp. 6–7. *La Democracia* reported that a family of four rode for four and a half hours, spending their week's savings of three pesos, 11 December 1906, p. 1. In contrast, poor workers paid 4 pesos per month to rent a room in a *conventillo*. Barrán and Nahum, *El Uruguay del Novecientos*, p. 181.

⁴⁰ *La Tribuna Popular*, 3 June 1907, p. 2.

⁴¹ Postcard no. 163 published by A. Carluccio, no date.

popularity for the elite version of progress in the city. Within weeks the shine had disappeared from the trolley's image, and inside of a few years the streetcar became less a symbol of the future and more a symbol of oppressive foreign technology and centralised authority.

There may always have existed a certain ambivalence towards the electric trolley in Montevideo, but in the euphoria of the first weeks after its appearance, negative reactions were largely drowned out by popular infatuation with the machines. In the first weekend, a cable burned out, paralysing the *eléctricos* for a time and disappointing the crowds, but no one drew any public conclusions about the vulnerability of service from this incident. Perhaps the most revealing description relating to the symbolism of the streetcar at this time was the description of the opening day parade of trolleys in *La Tribuna Popular*: 'It was something like the coming of the Messiah, the passage of a monster, the revelation of a phenomenon.'⁴² In contrast to the other descriptions of irrepressible joy at seeing or riding the new cars, here we have an experience of the awesome, something which was at the same time beautiful and powerful, efficient and dangerous, quasi-religious and technological. Underneath these contradictory perceptions lay a certain degree of public fear at this latest European import. Even though the trolley had come late to Montevideo, there were indications that the city was still not yet ready for it.

The fears concerning the new streetcars came from several sources. First, there was a general fear of electricity among the citizenry. Electric light had appeared in the city in 1886 but it was still waging a battle for acceptance among gas light users twenty years later, partially due to the perceived probabilities of electrocution. Additionally, the storms that frequently ripped through the port city often converted electricity into a hazard as pedestrians, cart and tram drivers sought to avoid downed wires, sometimes unsuccessfully.⁴³ With the addition of trolley cables to the urban infrastructure, fires became commonplace in the period after 1906. Pylons at intersections burned, sending sparks into the air and threatening nearby structures as well as oncoming traffic. In the second week of service, a trolley cable on the narrow commercial street of Sarandí in the Ciudad Vieja ignited, sending sparks everywhere and frightening the confused passengers who nearly panicked.⁴⁴

The lack of socialisation to the workings of the electric streetcar led to a consistently high level of accidents in the early years. The increased

⁴² *La Tribuna Popular*, 9 December 1906, p. 6.

⁴³ *La Democracia*, 18 December 1906, p. 4 noted that a falling cable broken by a storm killed a horse drawing a tram.

⁴⁴ *La Tribuna Popular*, 17 December 1906, p. 7.

speed and quiet of the new cars made them especially dangerous to children, who were fond of playing in the streets, and to drivers of other vehicles who seemed not to pay them much attention. In the first week after inauguration *La Tribuna Popular* reported that a wagon driver was nearly run over by a trolley whose bell he did not hear, and lamented that 'the people do not have fear of the *eléctricos* and take notice of their presence with the greatest indifference, like someone hearing rain'.⁴⁵ Introducing a fast electric vehicle into horse-dominated streets without adequate traffic regulation resulted in congestion, as well as creating perilous situations in which motormen raced through intersections or around curves without sufficient warning in their attempts to keep to company schedules. The result was a series of regular crashes which claimed the lives of children, pedestrians, tram passengers and cart horses. In early 1909, newspapers carried accounts of as many as seven trolley collisions every day in Montevideo. These were greeted with both alarm and humour, fear being rechannelled into satire. One daily referred to a trolley which 'gave a beautiful kiss to a wagon' resulting in damage, while worrying that streetcar passengers were at risk 'of being reduced to an omelette' in the 'plague of crashes'.⁴⁶ Some journalists worried about the motormen's custom of 'having faith' as they crossed intersections rapidly without hitting the warning bell.⁴⁷ The front page of one Sunday paper featured a six-column cartoon entitled 'Macabre Things'. It was a drawing in the style of José Posada, showing a Buceo-bound trolley driven by a smiling skeleton with large black birds hovering overhead carrying scythes. Alongside and behind the trolley people are lying in the street or caught under the car, screaming, while in front a dog and several people flee. The caption reads 'Progress is something that appears much like barbarism'.⁴⁸

Aside from documenting this litany of accidents, the press also served as the mouthpiece of disgruntled trolley riders. Complaints surfaced in the major dailies over unsafe operating practices; full fares for children; motormen who committed the sin of smoking on duty; lubrication practices which resulted in the soiling of passengers' clothes; conductors' lack of attention to boarding passengers who were left standing on the corner or, worse, hanging from the platforms of moving cars; and the danger of suddenly falling windows, referred to by one writer as *guillotinas*.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 16 December 1906, p. 4. ⁴⁶ *La Tribuna Popular*, 6 March 1909, p. 6.

⁴⁷ *El Siglo*, 2 March 1909, p. 1; *La Tribuna Popular*, 11 March 1909, p. 6.

⁴⁸ *La Tribuna Popular*, 23 June 1907, p. 1.

⁴⁹ *La Razón*, 18 January 1907, p. 2 and 6 February 1907, p. 1; *La Democracia*, 24 January 1907, p. 1; *La Tribuna Popular*, 5 March 1909, p. 8.

This dark humour, and the equation of progress with danger and death, suggests that the fears generated by the new streetcars may have been due only superficially to accidents. The electric streetcar was a fearful symbol because it embodied a new urban social order that was changing the mental and the physical dimensions of Montevideo. One author, writing of Montevideo's metamorphosis, remembers

That city, such as I knew it in my childhood and adolescence, retained its hereditary characteristics until 1906. Previously there had been partial changes, growth in population and in extension, but from that year, the mentality of the metropolis presented a different aspect; and that transformation had as a fundamental factor the implantation of the electric streetcar followed by the rest of the motorised means of transport.⁵⁰

When Montevideo's streetcar network was transformed from horse power to electrical power, the trolleys themselves were transformed as public places. Virtually overnight the populace became mobile, with ridership expanding from just over 30 million in 1906 to more than 62 million in 1910.⁵¹ The sheer volume of passengers necessitated widely disseminated rules of behaviour for the public, such as the proper way to board and disembark from the trams, and prohibitions of drunkenness, spitting or smoking on a closed car which had female riders.⁵² Some of these were carry-overs from the horse-tram era, but they appear to have had more force on the new cars than on the small, old and dirty *cucarachas*.⁵³ The widely employed system of fining conductors and motormen for violations of the *reglamento* effectively converted them into policemen on their cars, keeping order among passengers in defence of their jobs and their meagre wages.

Streetcar workers and the anarchist culture

The new urban order which the elite attempted to lay out for Montevideo seems particularly evident in the working situation of the trolley men themselves. From the outset, the conductor and motorman formed an inseparable part of the new *eléctrico*, almost as a machine ensemble.⁵⁴ At the inauguration, newspapers reported that one of the joys of riding the

⁵⁰ Luis Enrique Azarola Gil, *Ayer, 1882-1952* (Lausanne, 1953), p. 37.

⁵¹ Eduardo Acevedo, *Anales Históricas del Uruguay*, vol. v (Montevideo, 1934), p. 458. La Transatlántica's ridership jumped from under 5 million on horse cars in 1905 to over 24 million in 1910. Reginald Lloyd, *Impresiones de la República del Uruguay en el Siglo Veinte* (London, 1912), p. 374.

⁵² Junta E. Administrativa, Dirección de Rodados, *Reglamento de Tranvías Eléctricos* (Montevideo, 1910), pp. 9-11. The original regulations were printed in *La Tribuna Popular*, 8 December 1906, p. 2.

⁵³ Horse tram rules are reprinted in *Colección Legislativa, 1898* (Montevideo), pp. 322-8.

⁵⁴ I have borrowed the term from Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey* (New York, 1977), chapter two, but have altered its definition to include the workers.

new cars was for passengers to touch the smart new uniforms of the crew members which were blue-grey and carried the initials of the company, like a brand.⁵⁵ Perhaps even more telling, the photograph of the first streetcar put into service showed a motorman surrounded by dignitaries on the front platform, but the caption which identified these men failed to mention him at all.⁵⁶ These new workers were meant to be efficient, silent and invisible.

The two foreign-owned trolley companies, in tandem with the city, instituted a military-like discipline on the new street cars which was consistent with the notions of scientific management then prevalent in Europe and the United States.⁵⁷ The new code of behaviour replaced the easy familiarity of horsecarmen and their passengers in the interests of efficiency.⁵⁸ Gone were the days when horse tram conductors had the time to romance girlfriends along their routes, and when regular riders could signal drivers from inside their house windows to stop and wait.⁵⁹ By contrast, motormen and conductors on the *eléctricos* were monitored by a phalanx of inspectors, policemen and even passengers throughout the workday. These watchers insisted on compliance with schedules and operating regulations, proper accounting of tickets and money, the wearing of heavy company uniforms all year long, and 'proper' etiquette and courtesy towards the riding public.⁶⁰ Failure to comply with these regulations resulted in fines, suspensions and sometimes dismissals.⁶¹ Furthermore, crewmen faced workdays of ten hours or longer, lengthy unpaid waiting periods in stations, and strict regulations which kept them virtual prisoners on the car platforms for five to eight hours at a stretch without relief.⁶² They also had to work on Sundays and national holidays, and were thus under a great deal of long-term stress. If they faltered or failed to anticipate movements in the congested streets and became involved in traffic accidents, they were summarily whisked off to jail by the police, even when they themselves had been injured.⁶³ Working under

⁵⁵ *La Tribuna Popular*, 20 November 1906, p. 2 and 10 December 1906, p. 7.

⁵⁶ *Uruguay Weekly News*, 25 November 1906, p. 2.

⁵⁷ A manifesto written by the streetcar mechanics during the strike of 1911 claims that their superior in the Goes Station 'orders the workers militarily, as if he was commanding genuine soldiers.' *La Razón*, 15 May 1911, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Junta E. Administrativa, *Reglamento de Tranvías Eléctricos* (Montevideo, 1910).

⁵⁹ The first is quoted in Ferrán, *La Mala Vida en el 900*, p. 82, the second is from Diego Fischer and Rosario Cecilio, *Noventa y tantos...* (Montevideo, 1991), p. 97.

⁶⁰ La Transatlántica Compañía de Tranvías Eléctricos, *Reglamento* (Montevideo, no date), pp. 3-4; *La Razón*, 6 February 1907, p. 1.

⁶¹ Francisco Corney, one of the spokesmen of the trolley workers and a leading anarchist organiser, claimed during the 1911 strike that fines reduced the wages of streetcarmen by as much as 40 per cent. *La Democracia*, 17 May 1911, pp. 1-2.

⁶² Rodríguez Díaz, *Los Sectores Populares en el Uruguay del Novecientos*, p. 53; *La Razón*, 12 May 1911, p. 2; *El Día*, 12 May 1911.

⁶³ *El Siglo*, 9 March 1909, p. 3.

these conditions and literally riding the wave of new technology all day long, trolley workers began to question the value of this version of progress, which brought with it a machine-like social order. It did not take them long to search out alternatives, the most appealing of which was anarchism.

Anarchism came to Uruguay with the waves of Italian, French and Spanish immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century. These included participants in various European revolutions, as well as those fleeing repression in Argentina. The local variant of anarchism drew heavily on the theories of Mikhail Bakunin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Francisco Ferrer and Errico Malatesta, and was widely disseminated among artisans through the anarchist press (which consisted of 26 different periodicals between 1878–1905).⁶⁴ These papers promulgated a rich diversity of views and were associated with bakers, tailors, bricklayers, shoemakers and eventually industrial workers such as dockworkers, meatpackers, chemical workers and streetcar-men.⁶⁵ Anarchists took up non-labour issues such as holistic medicine, vegetarianism, atheism, free love, sexual equality and a campaign against forced vaccination, but these remained at the periphery of the movement.⁶⁶ There also emerged a self-taught ‘me’ generation of intellectuals that developed after 1900 in cafés such as the Polo Bamba.⁶⁷ But there were few ‘professional’ anarchists, nor many individuals practising ‘propaganda by the deed’ or ‘expropriations’ in this period.⁶⁸ The anarchist movement was syncretic and fairly tolerant of diversity, and therefore generally avoided serious internal splits prior to 1922.⁶⁹

The syndicalist philosophy became dominant in the first few years of the new century, linking artisans, industrial workers and café intellectuals. In 1905, artisans and workers of diverse backgrounds formed the Federación Obrera Regional Uruguay (FORU), a federation of unions and guilds which campaigned for the eight-hour day; a minimum wage; clean factories; the lowering of rents; the abolition of night work, child

⁶⁴ Carlos Zubillaga and Jorge Balbis, *Historia del Movimiento Sindical Uruguay*, vol. II, *Prensa obrera y obrerista, 1878–1905* (Montevideo, 1986), p. 51.

⁶⁵ Rama, *Obreros y anarquistas* (Montevideo, 1969), pp. 28 and 32; Fernando López D’Alessandro, *Historia de la izquierda Uruguaya: 1838–1910, Anarquistas y Socialistas*, vol. I (Montevideo, 1988).

⁶⁶ *Despertar*, vol. II, no. 8, February 1906, p. 68 and *El Faro*, September 1910, pp. 4–5 and October 1910, pp. 42–3.

⁶⁷ Alberto Zum Felde, *Proceso Intelectual del Uruguay: La Generación del Novecientos*, vol. II, fourth edition (Montevideo, 1985), pp. 10, 16–17, 35–9.

⁶⁸ Rama, *Obreros y anarquistas*, p. 33.

⁶⁹ Zum Felde, pp. 27–31; Fernando López D’Alessandro, *Historia de la izquierda uruguaya, 1911–1918, La izquierda durante el Batllismo*, vol. II, part one (Montevideo, 1990), pp. 42–4, 54.

labour, piecework and fines; all along the road to the 'social and economic emancipation' of the proletariat from capitalism.⁷⁰ In its first issue, the confederation's newspaper supported the trolley workers' desire for 'more respect, more bread and a little more rest' while it laid out a broader view of how modern society functioned:

Our proposals do not stop there. Fortunately we have reached the understanding that bourgeois society lives from our work. Therefore our organisations have a vision beyond mere immediate improvements. Today, after the triumph [of the general strike], we are still subject to the exploitation of the insatiable capitalist monster.⁷¹

Later in the same issue, it was agreed that capitalism de-naturalised man, turning the 'social man of today' into 'a strange mixture of civilisation and barbarism'.⁷² Over time FORU elaborated a vision of a 'new economic order'. In the words of Francisco Corney, an anarchist organiser of streetcar workers, the future would

annul all privilege, proclaim economic equality, annul the valuing of all products, free consumption and free production and stop putting obstacles to the free manifestation of thought as human activities.⁷³

In Uruguay, the anarchist version of progress was egalitarian, anti-capitalist and tinged with a certain self-discipline with regard to needs. The organ of the bricklayers' union equated progress with a generalised happiness, which was contrasted with a Manichean picture of the present:

We are in a society of rich and poor, of exploited and exploiters, workers and idlers, executioners and victims, the fat and the hungry, masters and slaves, and in this state we are not able to have peace, nor harmony, nor love, nor fraternity between men. Nature is lavish and production is growing profusely. Isn't it therefore stupid and criminal that men exterminate each other, some in order to monopolise and others in order to win that which we have more than enough of?⁷⁴

This sentiment was echoed in the Declaration of Principles FORU adopted at its 1911 Congress. Like the elite it critiqued, it based its worldview on science and the concept of social evolution, declaring:

reason tells us that greater facility of production should accompany a general improvement in the life of the people, that this contradictory phenomenon demonstrates the present vicious social constitution; that this vicious constitution is the cause of internal wars, crimes, degeneration, disturbing the broad concept of humanity which modern thinkers have given us, based on observation and scientific induction of social phenomena.⁷⁵

It was in this atmosphere of egalitarianism, scientific enquiry and

⁷⁰ *La Democracia*, 5 January 1907, p. 4.

⁷¹ *La Federación*, vol. I, no. 1, 15 June 1911, p. 1.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁷³ *La Democracia*, 9 May 1911, p. 4.

⁷⁴ *El Nivel*, vol. II, no. 15, 1 May 1909, p. 1.

⁷⁵ *La Razón*, 4 May 1911, p. 2.

respect for the dignity of the individual that the streetcar workers organised themselves, and embarked on a slow evolution towards an anarchist working-class consciousness. In the process they constructed an alternative vision of the future that was directly counter to the position of Montevideo's elite and, in particular, to the ideas of order and discipline promoted by the two foreign-owned streetcar companies.

Workplace Resistance and the Counter Discourse

Progress had already become a point of contention in conflicts between horsecar workers and streetcar companies on the eve of electrification in 1906. During a successful strike for increased wages, a workers' delegation issued a manifesto portraying the companies as outside the flow of history:

If on our part there is only a question of economic order, on the side of the owners is intransigence and the belief in a principle of authority laced with despotism, because they prefer to lose large sums before increasing our daily wages by a few cents. [If they win this conflict, they will soon face another strike] because social progress is something undeniable, and when reason struggles no one can defeat it.⁷⁶

Unfortunately, electrification did not immediately improve the lives of streetcar workers, some of whom were forced to retire while others had to undergo the rigours of the industrial discipline described above. This was foreshadowed by FORU's sceptical view of technological change:

the discovery of a new instrument of wealth and its perfection brings misery to thousands of homes, whereas reason tells us that a greater facility of production should give rise to a general betterment of the life of the people.⁷⁷

Problems on the trolley network surfaced as early as June 1907, when 40 conductors and drivers for La Comercial were fired after they reacted bitterly to regulations regarding payment for uniforms, new wage scales and the imposition of an authority structure which left them feeling 'as if they were soldiers'.⁷⁸ Attempts to organise resistance failed as the company easily replaced these men. In 1910, streetcarmen founded their first newspaper, *El Combate*, and complained openly of bad treatment by 'impertinent' passengers and 'ill-humoured station chiefs', equating their own position with slaves, and demanding the return of their 'lost rights'.⁷⁹ Responding to the firing of two tram workers who had participated in a meeting with Argentine workers in 1910, *El Combate* attacked the company as anti-progressive:

⁷⁶ Quoted in *La Democracia*, 6 February 1906, p. 3.

⁷⁷ *La Emancipación*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 January 1907, p. 1.

⁷⁸ *La Tribuna Popular*, 23 June 1907, p. 4.

⁷⁹ *El Combate*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 June 1910, 'A los empleados de tranvías'.

To fire two men for having participated in a workers' meeting is a monstrous offence which demonstrates that the representatives of that company have lost all humanitarian notions toward their fellow creatures and that they intend, by using the family in an arbitrary manner, to smother the marvellous advances of progress.⁸⁰

This set the tone for the following year, as trolley workers concentrated their efforts on strengthening their union and becoming one of the more powerful elements within FORU.

The conflict between bourgeois and anarchist notions of progress became most pronounced during 1911. In May, trolley workers launched a strike over reform of work rules, pay increases, reduction in hours and the recent firings of union organisers. The companies followed their traditional tactics of refusing to negotiate and of dismissing workers believed to be leaders in the action. What is most interesting about this strike is that rather than shunning the rhetoric of progress, streetcar workers seized it and used it for their own ends in the battle to preserve some control over their lives. A flyer in support of the streetcar workers referred to the company managers as 'poisonous reptiles of capitalism',⁸¹ harsh language indeed in the context of a discourse based on ideas of social evolution. A short time later, supervisory inspectors directed a letter to the newly formed trolley union which claimed that the call to strike sparked 'our spirits as lovers of the laws of Progress... The struggle is the law of life.'⁸² After two weeks of stalemate between the workers and the streetcar companies FORU stepped into the fray by declaring the city's first general strike, effectively shutting down Montevideo for two days, as thousands of workers and residents, including women and newsboys, joined in support of the trolleyemen. Several days later the streetcarmen returned to work, after the companies conceded some of their demands. But this was not the end of the debate. In the following month, streetcar workers launched their second newspaper, *El Tranvía*, which defended their interests, publicised new firings and continued a verbal assault on the elite.⁸³

In their discourse on progress, trolley workers posed a different set of criteria from those used by the elite for evaluating modernisation and social evolution. Francisco Corney, speaking to 16,000 demonstrators at a wharf-front protest during the 1911 strike, said that nations could be considered progressive when the home of the workers had bread and liberty, and that the prosperity of a country was demonstrated through its

⁸⁰ *El Combate*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 June 1910.

⁸¹ Great Britain, Public Record Office, FO 371 1276 23908, 1911.

⁸² *La Razón*, 13 May 1911, p. 2.

⁸³ *El Tranvía* began as a 4-page weekly in June, then became an 8-page bimonthly publication in August, lasting until the end of the year.

benefiting the poor.⁸⁴ This was a far cry from putting new technology in the streets and attracting tourists. In its first issue *El Tranvía* echoed this call for bread and liberty, and later equated the anarchist slogan 'Worker Emancipation' with the ideas of 'home, family, honour, welfare, work and harmony', all of which it saw as jeopardised in the context of Montevideo's strife.⁸⁵ Still, the paper had very down-to-earth notions of what had been won through the strike, which it detailed in both economic and cultural terms, looking towards an improved future: money to feed and clothe trolley worker families against the winter, and to educate their children, with an occasional trip to the theatre or the countryside; time to commit their ideas to paper, to eat calmly and to get some rest after a hard day's work.⁸⁶ Following FORU's lead, *El Tranvía* entered into the class rhetoric of the period, and frequently exposed what it considered to be the myths and contradictions of capital as embodied in the actions of the two streetcar companies. It reminded its readers that

Capital is only an inert absolutely sterile material. It is certain that it permits labour to produce, but by itself it produces absolutely nothing.

Therefore, everything which is called profit or the product of capital, in reality is nothing more than the product of unpaid work.⁸⁷

The paper took a consistently egalitarian line, attacking privilege wherever it appeared. It contrasted the separate treatment of those workers who had remained loyal to the company with strikers who were victimised by inspectors for petty or imagined infractions and by company blacklists. It lambasted the coverage of a fatal shooting of a motorman by an inspector in the conservative paper *El Siglo* as a 'war to the death against everything which represents progress', and characterised both this daily and *La Transatlántica* as 'declared enemies of the working class'. In an article on the rising cost of living, a key element in the strike, the paper attacked the avarice and ambition of Montevideo's merchants and landlords, describing the high prices and rents which they visited on the poor in their desire to live like the 'Rochilds' (*sic*). *El Tranvía* saved its greatest wrath for Juan Cat, the manager of *La Comercial*, who was described as 'the elder lord of the company' and the instigator of a disciplinary system unmatched for 'barbarism' since the days of the Spanish Inquisition. With such rhetoric, the paper attempted to undercut the image of the elite as the engine of the city's improvement and the legitimate arbiter of its future.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ *La Razón*, 22 May 1911, p. 4.

⁸⁵ *El Tranvía*, vol. 1, no. 1, 10 June 1911, p. 1; vol. 1, no. 14, 15 November 1911, p. 4.

⁸⁶ *El Tranvía*, vol. 1, no. 10, 15 September 1911, p. 2.

⁸⁷ *El Tranvía*, vol. 1, no. 2, 17 June 1911, p. 2-3.

⁸⁸ *El Tranvía*, vol. 1, no. 8, 15 August 1911, p. 2; vol. 1, no. 10, 15 September 1911, p. 1; vol. 1, no. 14, 15 November 1911, pp. 2 and 4; vol. 1, no. 15, 30 November 1911, p. 1.

But progress could also be seen rather than just heard in Montevideo. The violent actions of streetcar workers and crowds during strikes, while at first glance destructive, also embodied a certain attitude critical of 'progress'. During the horse-car era, a small degree of sabotage was employed as leverage against the streetcar companies, with minimal success. Strikers placed soap on the rails for the purpose of derailing the slow-moving cars and interrupting the movement of passengers. These actions do not appear to have caused serious damage to property or persons.⁸⁹ But with electrification, oligopoly, expansion of the workforce and the coming of a new urban order, streetcar strikes became more violent and the trolleys served as useful targets for the anger of the poor. During the 1911 strike, crowds massed around the few trolleys which continued to run, launching stones against their windows and sometimes injuring passengers. Tar was also thrown onto trams, their cables were cut, and some were targets of revolver shots. A La Transatlántica motorman took the extreme but effective action of abandoning his car in motion, but not before he set it in high speed. It crashed into the streetcar in front of it, destroying both of them and quickly jamming traffic.⁹⁰ These acts served symbolically to destroy the machine ensemble, politically to separate the conductor and the motorman from the car itself, and in so doing, to restore human qualities to the streetcar workers. The sabotage effectively distanced the men from the now-hated companies, a process which allowed them to cement ties with other sectors of the Montevideo working class and with the public at large. In turn, this facilitated the spread of a single labour dispute into the city's first general strike. From this time forward, the *eléctrico* ceased to serve as an unambiguously positive symbol of 'progress' for the city's elite, and became a target for demonstrators during May Day celebrations, protests and major strikes.

Conclusion

In a series of lectures on the history of twentieth-century Uruguay delivered in Montevideo in 1993, Gerardo Caetano discussed the role of the social imaginary in both fuelling and impeding the construction of the nation's identity and its historical project. He outlined the euphoria of the early years of the century as waves of immigrants flooded into Montevideo, the evolution of the first welfare state in the Americas, guided by Batlle, which gave the small country a reputation as the Switzerland of South America, and the surprising international soccer victories of the national team in the 1920s and the first World Cup in 1930, held in Montevideo, which led to a popular sense of 'exceptionalism' and

⁸⁹ *La Tribuna Popular*, 2 February 1906, p. 2.

⁹⁰ *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), 23 May 1911, p. 10.

widespread expectations of an unlimited future. This euphoria, or mass self-deception regarding progress, was eventually undermined by economic stagnation in the 1950s and 1960s, mass emigration and a new form of exceptionalism in the form of military dictatorship and 'dirty war' in the 1970s. Throughout the twentieth-century, 'progress' has been a key to understanding the national mythology which was built up around these processes and events.

In retrospect, it is clear that the period between the inauguration of electric streetcar service in 1906 and the general strike of 1911 was a crucial time in the development of social order and public space in Montevideo. The trolley unleashed an intense debate about the nature of progress and technology in the city, about relations between the new social classes that inhabited the urban environment, and about who was to define the terms of the new urban order. The elite's carefully staged rituals of streetcar inauguration did not bring about an equally well-managed city of machines efficiently transporting and controlling employees, workers and shoppers. While the city quickly became dependent upon its trolley network, the streetcar itself was always viewed with mixed sentiments by the riding public and the streetcarmen who laboured upon it, eventually becoming an ambiguous symbol of urban progress. The trolley never became the clean, ordered conveyance which the rich had imagined, but was instead a place where different social and parochial sectors mixed, shoulder to shoulder or face to face. It was a moving site where people argued, sold commodities, committed crimes, read newspapers, dispensed propaganda and started romances. In short, the streetcar remained a largely uncontrolled public space, in spite of the elite's best efforts.

In broader terms, the result of the discourse on progress in Montevideo was a stalemate between the elite, the middle class and the workers. None of these groups was able to obtain the form of progress which it desired, and something along the lines of a fluid compromise was reached. Foreign entrepreneurs were not given *carte blanche* to develop the city. The actions of the streetcar companies were very restricted by the populist state all the way through until the 1940s, when they were nationalised and finally dismantled in the 1950s. They were unable to expand the network much beyond the original reach of the system during World War I, thus limiting the growth of Montevideo. The city government effectively denied them even a single increase in the basic fare from 1906 to 1936, while it promoted small public and private bus lines as competition to the foreign firms. Nor were builders able to engage in large-scale urban renewal as the poor were able to remain in enclaves in the Old City as well as in the Centro, rather than being deported to the borders of the city. The streetcar

did, however, contribute to the division of Montevideo into distinct commercial and residential zones, and to the development of wealthy suburbs through land speculation.

The anarchists of FORU and the streetcar workers were not able to overturn 'wage slavery', nor to bring about a rationalist social revolution, but they did carry out significant strikes that went a long way towards securing basic labour laws and to limiting the ability of the company managers to turn them into machine-like soldiers. At times, they also assumed control of the streets. Urban order dissolved into disorder on numerous occasions, including a second violent streetcar strike in 1918, which again evolved into a general strike. The countervailing discourse on progress articulated by anarchists suggests that they had a larger impact on the history of the city than current historiography allows. Rather than viewing anarchism as an impractical short-lived movement that was co-opted by Batlle,⁹¹ it may be more useful to evaluate the culture of anarchism in Montevideo as it developed in cafés and union halls and to look at its long-term impact on thought and public behaviour in the city. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the anarchists is that in the early years of this century they forced the debate over the future of their city out of the private clubs and corporate offices and into the newspapers and the streets.

⁹¹ López D'Alesandro, *Historia de la izquierda uruguaya, 1911-1918*, vol. II, part one.