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**James C. Knarr**. *Uruguay and the United States, 1903-1929: Diplomacy in the Progressive Era.* Kent: Kent State University Press, 2012. 224 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60635-128-4.

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**Small Place, Big Story?**

In a 1995 episode of the FOX television series *The Simpsons*, dopey dad Homer looks at a globe (for the first time, we presume), and gets a chuckle from South America: "Look at this country: U R Gay!"[1] The joke relies on Homer's well-known ignorance and lack of reading comprehension (as well as borderline homophobia). But it also reflects Americans' lack of knowledge about Uruguay, the tiny nation wedged between Brazil and Argentina.

Indeed, judging by Uruguay's almost complete absence from standard surveys of the field, historians of U.S. foreign relations seem to take little interest in it.[2] Uruguay's miniscule population and geographic remoteness suggest no more than minor importance to North America's fortunes. Yet under the leadership of José Batlle y Ordoñez, Uruguay's historical significance far exceeded its size. As president from 1903 to 1907 and 1911 to 1915, and as informal leader well into the 1920s, Batlle oversaw the creation of the first modern social welfare state in the Western Hemisphere.[3] Enmeshed in reform networks stretching to North America and across the Atlantic Ocean, Uruguay was anything but isolated. Its story connects directly to current scholarly interests in transnational reform networks, state building, and international history.[4] Thus by exploring Batlle's relationship with the United States in the context of social reform, James C. Knarr's *Uruguay and the United States, 1903-1929: Diplomacy in the Progressive Era* fills a small historiographical gap, but one with the potential to illuminate larger themes.

The goal of *Uruguay and the United States* is to document the "diplomatic, economic, and social relations" of the two countries (p. 1), and to demonstrate that a shared commitment to progressive reform improved bilateral ties. Knarr's five chronological chapters present plenty of evidence of good relations, and thus serve as "a corrective to the Big Stick historiography that has come to characterize the view of U.S.-Latin American relations between 1898 and 1933" (p. 148). In so doing, Knarr offers a welcome reminder of the diversity of North American foreign policies in Latin America, for U.S. policies towards Uruguay differed dramatically from those it practiced in Central America and the Caribbean.

Before 1900, the two nations had few relations of any kind. But when Batlle came to power in 1903 he began to look to the United States as an example of progressive modernity worthy of emulation. Secretary of state Elihu Root's 1906 visit further convinced the Uruguayan president of the potential of North American friendship, and Batlle subsequently sent observers to the United States to study its municipal and national reforms. U.S. investments expanded–especially in the meat industry–and many U.S. tourists added Montevideo to their itineraries. Meanwhile, Batlle's newspaper, *El Día*, reported frequently and admiringly on North American developments. Even when Latin Americans–inspired by Uruguayan intellectual José Enrique Rodó's polemical *Ariel* (1900)–criticized Yankee imperialism, Batlle and his followers praised the colossus of the North (*El Día*, meanwhile, ignored or excused U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean and Mexico before the 1920s [p. 126]).

Uruguayan support for the United States was more than rhetorical. Batllistas–Batlle's allies–sided with the North Americans during World War I. Though never declaring war on Germany, Uruguay severed diplomatic relations. More aggressively, it seized eight German merchant ships in local ports and then leased them to the U.S. Emergency Fleet Corporation (p. 95). In return, the United States secured Uruguay an invitation to the Versailles conference. Like many other weak nations, Uruguay embraced the Wilsonian vision of collective security; unlike peoples in Asia and Africa however, its endorsement survived the peace conference.[5] While the U.S. Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles, Uruguayan

senators promptly ratified it and joined the League of Nations (p. 104).

Indeed, Uruguay's leadership strenuously courted U.S. support during and after the war. Montevideo gave U.S. admiral William Caperton a grand welcome each time his squadron arrived in port. It named a seaside boulevard after Woodrow Wilson. It even designated July 4, 1918 a national holiday in honor of the United States, proclaiming that "under the present circumstances, the United States, faithful to its principles, has ... become the maintainer of the institutions that are so dear to us" (p. 98).

Relations soured in the 1920s. In Uruguay, Batllistas lost their iron grip on power, and conservatives and radicals became much more assertive. Each opposed the United States; in contrast to the cheers of "!Viva Norte América!" that accompanied Root's triumphant 1906 visit, U.S. president Herbert Hoover was greeted in 1928 by radicals proclaiming "!Viva Sandino!"–a protest against the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua. Meanwhile, the Progressive Era in the United States had come to an end, its reformers replaced, in Knarr's estimation, with isolationists and conservatives. In place of the "ideological affinity" of Theodore Roosevelt's time (p. 149), U.S. officials now saw in liberal Battlismo "a strong trend towards socialism" (p. 123). Two decades of mutual admiration petered out amidst rising ideological tensions.

The extent of the "bilateral respect and cordiality" between the United States and Uruguay is not always clear, especially from the northern side (p. 148). In 1919, supposedly at the height of good relations, a State Department clerk writing on behalf of President Wilson mistakenly addressed a cable to Paraguayan leader José Montero, "president of Uruguay, Asunción" (p. 104). Nevertheless, being confused with one's neighbor is certainly preferable to being invaded. At least in comparative terms, U.S.-Uruguayan relations were benign. And Knarr convincingly documents the expansion of economic and social ties between the two nations.

More interesting than the existence of good relations are the explanations for them. Knarr emphasizes ideological and personal factors. He attributes great influence to Elihu Root's visit. The secretary's kind words and amiability "encouraged Batlle and his followers to adopt U.S. ideas and actively to seek U.S. goods in their quest for modernity" (p. 147). Because governments in both Uruguay and the United States promoted a reformist agenda, they viewed each other as natural partners, Knarr suggests.

Yet he also points out that a more hardheaded calculus drove Uruguayan leaders. As a small state, Uruguay was vulnerable to foreign influence. Batlle resented British economic neocolonialism and feared Argentine and Brazilian meddling. In 1903, facing a rebellion from political opponents operating from bases in Argentina, Batlle requested the visit of a U.S. warship in order to forestall Argentine intervention (note that this came three years before Root's visit). During World War I, Batllistas sought U.S. support because they feared an invasion from German settlements across the border in Brazil. After the war, relations soured when U.S. capital supplanted British investors. As Knarr puts it, "Uncle Sam replaced John Bull as the target of the Uruguayan economic nationalism that Batlle had unleashed" (p. 121).

This analysis seems to suggest that realpolitik can explain Uruguayan policy regardless of ideological affinities. "[T]hough idealism was important in Batlle's thinking," Knarr explains, "it was realism that principally motivated his foreign policy toward the United States" (p. 149). Still, he insists at other times that progressive ideas did matter. Determining just how much is difficult, and the reader is occasionally left confused.

In any case, Knarr's focus on bilateral diplomacy obscures some larger issues. First, it elides the place of Europe in the story of progressive reform. Knarr shows conclusively that Batlle and his followers regarded the United States as a source of reformist ideas and personnel. Relying on diplomatic correspondence and Uruguayan state archives, Knarr ably chronicles how Uruguayan representatives toured U.S. factories, collected reformist literature, and picked the brains of progressives on matters ranging from public education to woman suffrage to agricultural development. Batllistas even invited North Americans to head national institutions. For instance, North American Daniel E. Salmon organized and administered the nation's only veterinary college (p. 64). North American examples thus provided raw material with which to build the "model country" (as Batlle called it) in Uruguay.

But North Americans had no monopoly on progressivism and Knarr occasionally admits as much. "[T]he United States contributed noticeably and significantly but not exclusively to Uruguayan state building," he notes (p. 63). Batlle and his lieutenants looked also to European states. Yet because of his emphasis on the U.S.-Uruguayan relationship, Knarr seems to suggest pride of place for the United States in this reformist interchange. Readers will not learn much about Uruguay's internal political and economic dynamics, and it is difficult

to ascertain precisely how U.S. and European reformist models interacted with Uruguayan conditions and with each other. The bilateral framing obscures the extent to which progressive reform emerged from a simultaneously East-West and North-South system of exchange. Oddly, Daniel Rodgers's *Atlantic Crossings* (1998) goes unmentioned here, and Knarr does not note the centrality of European projects to U.S. progressive reformers. Thus this book misses an opportunity to explore how the shifting confluence of transatlantic and hemispheric power shaped (or was shaped by) economic and political development in the Americas and Europe.

This raises another question. When Batlle and his followers viewed the United States as a "modern" and "progressive" state (and vice versa), what precisely did they see? In other words, what was the particular content of the "progressive" ideology that linked the two states?- Knarr suggests it was a shared emphasis on reform, a desire to improve the lives of the less fortunate, and the hope of limiting the abuses of capital. One would expect, in this case, a worsening of relations during the conservative presidency of William Howard Taft. And it would be surprising for Elihu Root–a noted conservative in matters economic and political, as suggested by the title of Richard Leopold's *Elihu Root and the Conservative Tradition* (1954)–to represent the face of liberal progressivism.

A shared belief in "civilization" and "progress" seems more likely to have linked the two nations. Certainly Theodore Roosevelt thought in these terms.[6] His corollary to the Monroe Doctrine outraged Latin Americans not only for its announcement of expanded U.S. imperialism but also because of its civilizational divisions: Roosevelt grouped the United States with Europe as advanced nations capable of carrying out international policing duties, casting Latin American states as knuckleheads in need of such policing. Yet, as Knarr notes, Roosevelt confined his armed interventions to the Caribbean region, and when he visited Uruguay in 1912 he told Batlle that "You and I belong to the same party." Batlle responded by acclaiming the United States as "the defender of the Monroe Doctrine," and Roosevelt replied that as soon as "any country in the New World stands on sufficiently high footing of orderly liberty and achieved success of self-respecting strength, it becomes a guarantor of the doctrine on a footing of complete equality" (pp. 74-75). Did this designation reflect the social welfare provisions of Batllismo? It seems equally likely that the relative "whiteness" of Uruguay's population and the development of its cities were what impressed Roosevelt. At various times, after all, Argentines and Chileans were deemed the "Yankees of South America" precisely for these virtues.[7] In other words, was it Uruguay's economic nationalism or economic prosperity that attracted Roosevelt's good wishes? Disentangling these concepts can help us transcend monolithic notions of "Latin America" and uncover the building blocks of hemispheric rivalry and cooperation in the early twentieth century.

While it does not answer all the questions that it raises, Knarr's *Uruguay and the United States* demonstrates that what may seem at first glance a marginal topic can in fact spotlight broader historical currents central to the creation of the modern era.

Notes

[1]. "Bart vs. Australia," *The Simpsons*, FOX, original airdate February 19, 1995.

[2].Two leading textbooks contain virtually no mention of the nation. See George Herring's *From Colony to Superpower : U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) ;and Robert Schulzinger's *U.S. Diplomacy since 1900*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). As Knarr observes, even specialized histories of U.S. relations with the Southern Cone– such as Arthur Whitaker's *The United States and the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay* (1976)– focus their analysis mainly on the region's larger states.

[3]. John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*, $3^{rd}$ ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011), 227-228.

[4]. Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), chap. 5.

[5]. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Curiously, Knarr does not cite this work.

[6]. Frank Ninkovich, "Theodore Roosevelt: Civilization as Ideology," *Diplomatic History* 10, no. 3 (1986): 221-245.

[7]. For example, William Eleroy Curtis, *The Capitals of Spanish America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1888).

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