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Pedro Cameselle-Pesce and Debbie Sharnak’s *Uruguay in Transnational Perspective*, an ambitious and dense coedited volume, is a much-welcome contribution to our understanding of Uruguay, often dwarfed by interest in, or comparisons with, its much larger South American neighbors. The editors claim to fill a gap in English-language scholarship on Uruguay, although it is worth mentioning that the last decade has seen a number of monographs in English exclusively on Uruguay, including periods or themes in Uruguayan history, particularly the 1973-85 dictatorship and literary and cinematic culture, building on a number of comparative studies that bring Uruguay into dialogue with Argentina.[1] However, this volume stands out in particular for eschewing this type of comparative approach with a single country or particular period, to offer a detailed transnational study on Uruguay. Indeed, the volume covers three centuries and incorporates the small Rioplatense nation into regional and global narratives, scrutinizing its transnationality across temporalities and disciplines.

The volume should be commended for simultaneously challenging Uruguay’s ostensibly peripheral position in both global history and regional history and its perceived exceptionality, which has characterized much scholarship on the country. Uruguay has often been viewed as exceptional, a notion that is encapsulated in its unofficial title as the “Switzerland of South America” in acknowledgment of its generally stable party politics prior to the 1973-85 dictatorship, or as a bastion of progressive social policies in the contemporary Frente Amplio era. Uruguay has been frequently overlooked from many global and regional studies, in favor of the larger or more “emblematic” country studies in Latin America.[2] Uruguay is, as the editors remind us, a “location where there is a ready flow of ideas, people, and movements either as a direct result or byproduct of geopolitical and economic exchanges” (p. 2). The 2013 law to fully
regulate Uruguay’s marijuana production, sale, and distribution (the first country in the world to do so) is a key example of Uruguay’s transnationality, and a good starting point for the volume, in highlighting how Uruguayan actors have been innovators and contributors to transnational regional and global historical trends. However, as the contributors to this volume show, Uruguay’s perceived exceptionality and peripheral position in the Latin American context tend to obfuscate its global influence as well as its insertion into and reception to the global and regional circulation of movements, ideas, and culture. Therein lies the originality of the volume: its challenge to both Uruguayan exceptionality and peripheralism by bringing to the fore discussions of lesser-known aspects of Uruguayan society, culture, and politics.

To this end, the volume takes a keenly multidisciplinary approach featuring contributions from specialists from Uruguay and beyond. It offers a complex study of Uruguay’s transnational positionality over the last three hundred years, journeying through nineteenth-century independence, sport, Cold War politics, and the post-dictatorship era. Potentially, such a broad panorama and mix of disciplinary approaches could have spread thin the volume’s focus, but as the key thread is transnationalism, it manages to maintain coherence, something that not all edited volumes achieve. The four sections work through a range of topics in rough chronological order. Although there is not enough space here to mention each chapter in significant detail, I discuss the four sections and highlight the key findings or focus on specific chapters.

The first section takes us back some three centuries. In “From the Banda Oriental to a Republic,” the first chapter offers a particularly original approach to the founding of the nation by challenging the idea of Uruguay as a Spanish colony. Fabrício Prado offers a detailed discussion of the effects of Portuguese presence during the eighteenth century and the role of Luso-Brazilian subjects in shaping Uruguayan society in and from the foundation of Colonia de Sacramento. Moreover, in examining the presence of Luso-Brazilians in towns and rural society, the author illuminates their key roles and effects on Uruguayan demographics, even beyond the Portuguese colonial project. The remaining chapters examine the colonial period but consider it from different angles. Nicolás Duffau and Ana Frega frame the revolutionary project of Uruguayan founding father José Gervasio Artigas as complex and transnational, while Alex Borucki brings the Afro-Uruguayans into a global discussion. Finally, Peter Winn analyzes British informal rule in Uruguay. All the chapters help us to understand the formation of Uruguay before and since independence beyond a focus on traditional independence leaders and caudillos.

The second section, “Forging Nationality and National Narratives,” turns to immigration, sport, and music in the country’s early history and their potential for challenging key narratives as well as their contribution to cultural movements beyond Uruguay. It encompasses such diverse topics as Italian immigration to the region in the early twentieth century (John Starosta Galante); Uruguayan soccer in terms of regional exchange with neighboring Argentina, on the international stage, and at the Olympics in the 1920s (Soledad Mocchi-Radichi and Rodrigo Viquiera); and the rise of tango in the Rioplatense region (Daniel Richter). The chapter on gymnastics by Paola Dogliotti Moro stands out in what the sport tells us about the circulation of ideas and policies transnationally. Gymnastics is not often discussed in scholarly texts, but here it serves as an entry point to scrutinize gender and eugenics in the mid-twentieth century. As with the rest of the section, sport and culture are used as lenses for exploring the deep connection between different Uruguayan actors both regionally and internationally.

The third section, “Social Movements and Solidarities,” suggests, at first glance, a theme that has garnered much international interest in Ur-
However, most studies on solidarity and transnational activism have tended to focus on the dictatorship period. Here, the time frame is slightly earlier, and the authors look at a range of marginalized groups in the first half of the twentieth century, tracing the feminist movements during the 1930s and 1940s with the figure of activist Paulina Luisi and her role at the intersection of anti-fascism and feminism (Katherine M. Marino) and examining Black anti-fascism through a close reading of the periodical *Nuestra Raza* in the 1930s (Vannina Sztainbok). Sztainbok astutely undertakes a detailed analysis of the publication to think more about Black Uruguayans as part of a transnational community and as contributors to pedagogy in and beyond Uruguay. The final chapter, by Megan Strom, turns to the role of Uruguayan students in forging international solidarity, even prior to the advent of dictatorship.

The focus of the fourth and final section is the Cold War, but instead of following the oft-examined exceptionality narrative, the editors and authors place the dictatorship era within global context, drawing on underused and new sources. The first two chapters consider Uruguay’s perhaps quite unlikely and surprisingly close relationship with Czechoslovakia during the latter half of the twentieth century. Aldo Marchesi and Vania Markarian discuss the Uruguayan intellectuals Aldo Solari and Trias, showing the connections between Uruguay and the Eastern European country. Michal Zourek’s chapter looks at Uruguay as a base of Czech operations during the Cold War, specifically the secret service in the region. The third and fourth chapters continue with this theme but look more at domestic organizations’ connections beyond Uruguayan borders: Jimena Alonso covers cooperation between the Christian Democrats in Uruguay and Chile and Troy Andreas Araiza Kokinis focuses on the anarchist movement in the mid-twentieth century. The volume closes with Mariana Achugur and Gabriela Fried Amilivia’s excellent discussion on domestic and transnational organizations’ attempts to bring crimes of sexual violence committed during the dictatorship to the Inter-American Commission for investigation. Attention to the testimonial process is particularly welcome as, until recently, sexual crimes were often not discussed by historians or have been confined to the margins of human rights discourse. Indeed, although not always tackled exclusively, gender is a theme that runs through the entire volume and offers a more complete perspective on Uruguayan transnationalism.

Although this accomplished volume offers a well-needed focus on a small—and frequently peripheral—nation, it is also instructive for other small countries, in terms of inviting scholars to think how they may contribute to transnational history, not only as receivers of external influence but also as active contributors clearly inserted into global politics and culture. One of the most interesting findings of the volume is how it sheds light on Uruguay’s resistance of power politics since the colonial times, which can certainly help us to understand the country today.

Notes


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