

Sources for Latin American Research At the International Institute of Social History

Illustrations in the Socialist Press of Buenos Aires in the Late XIX Century

Juan Buonuome

In their research about socialism and the labour movement in late nineteenth century Europe, historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and Franco Andreucci have demonstrated the richness of pictures and images as a tool of investigation. The different forms of images in allegories, portraits, and graphic humour provide information about key issues like gender relations and their links with popular peasant culture.¹ Visual sources can also be extremely useful for historians interested in Latin American socialism. The ‘*grabados de actualidad*’ (‘actuality illustrations’) published by *La Vanguardia* – the Socialist weekly paper – in Buenos Aires (Argentina) at the end of the 1890s may present a good example of such a type of analysis.

As a result of the massive influx of immigrants and a thriving export-led economy, the Argentine society was acquiring the appearance of a ‘great laboratory’ around the turn of the twentieth century.² Immigrant workers were the protagonists of great social and cultural change in Argentina that was more rapid and deeper than the one caused by the arrival of a large number of immigrants to the United States in the same period. It was a heterogeneous and mobile population in social and spatial terms, whom the socialist militants tried to convince with their propaganda. Some of the graphic work that appeared in the pages of *La Vanguardia* show how difficult this was. This weekly paper, published since 1894 and included in the collection of periodicals from the Argentine and Latin American labour movement at the International Institute of

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Figure 1. ‘Immigrants’

Source: *La Vanguardia*, 30/1/1897, p. 1.

Social History (IISH), was a promoter of the founding of the Socialist Party of Argentina.³ Also, it was the first socialist publication to regularly post illustrations. In 1897, the editors replaced some of their doctrinal writings by informational material including ‘*grabados de actualidad*’ to capture an audience which had a daily contact with newspapers but was still indifferent to socialist ideas.

One important feature of these images was the refusal to show the ethnic and cultural diversity of the working class. The Socialists’ insistence on the need for nationalizing foreigners as a condition for the exercise of their political rights made them rather insensitive to diversity. Thus, unlike the illustrations of local anarchist papers, which stressed the cultural uprooting of immigrants, *La Vanguardia* depicted the migration experience as a purely economic fact. For example, in ‘Immigrants’ we can see an enlightening contrast between those who came to the country to increase their wealth and those who, trying to get out of a miserable situation, saw their fantasies denied (Figure 1).

Another attribute of the corpus of illustrations of *La Vanguardia* is the use of the concept of the family to visualize the world of labour. In a society that annually received vast numbers of single men looking for a job, and in which there was a great diversity of family patterns, the socialists presented the ideal of a nuclear family that was becoming a distinction mark of ‘respectable’ middle classes (Figure 2).

Some of the ‘*grabados*’ depicted a non-conformist labour culture centred around the values of collective organization and class solidarity. The main deceit – one illustration hinted – was the hope and expectation of upward social

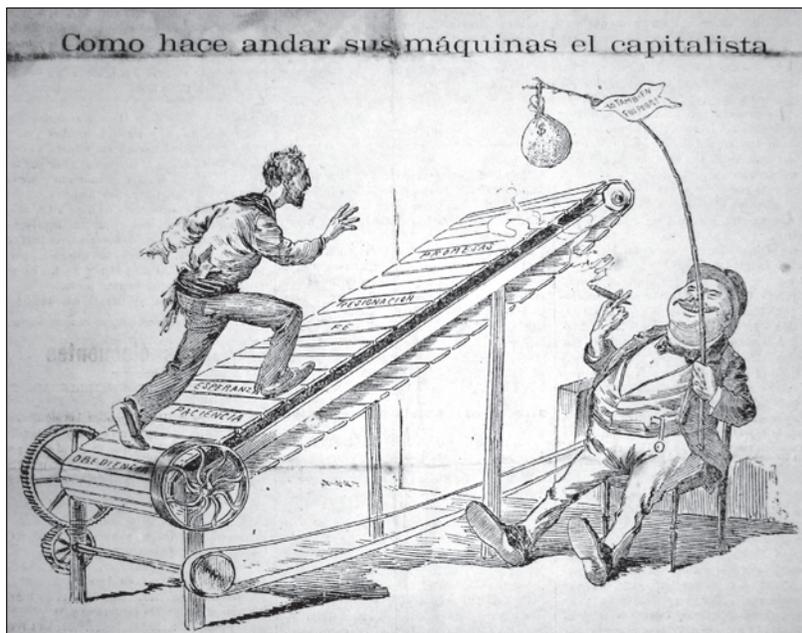
mobility. The ‘carrot’ for the individual worker was to become a rich man, but in the meantime the capitalist gained all the benefits. At the end of the road the capitalist showed a sign that read: ‘I was poor too!’ (Figure 3).

On the other hand, some of the illustrations emphasized the integrating component of socialist discourses and practices, obeying the myth of social mobility through higher education, discipline and individual effort. In a very

Figure 2. ‘May 1, 1898’



Source: Francisco Dagnino, *La Vanguardia*, 1/5/1898, p. 1.

Figure 3. ‘How the capitalist powers his machines’

Source: *La Vanguardia*, 15/5/1897, p. 1

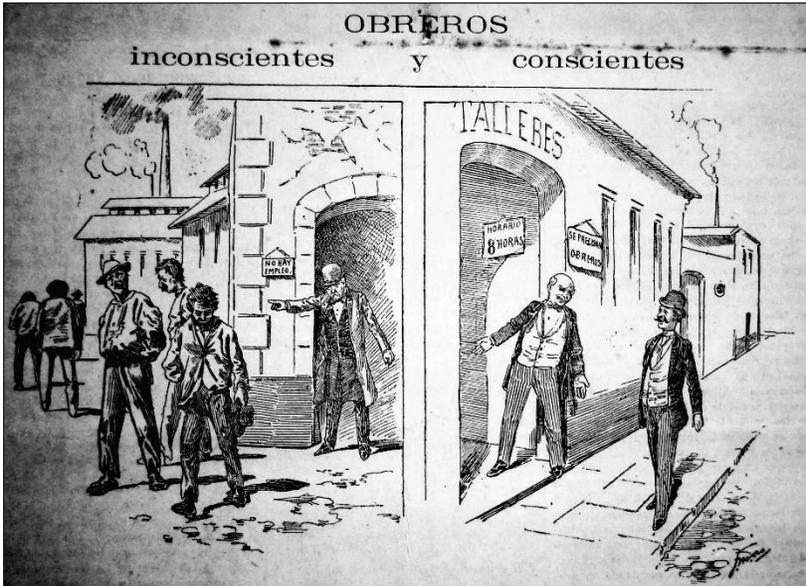
effective visual version of the contrast between the enlightened and the unenlightened worker, the Spanish cartoonist José María Cao illustrated the normative and moralizing tone used by the socialists to convert a marginal population into a responsible and productive working class that was more apt to make a contribution to economic and social progress (Figure 4).

While the frictions produced by the rapid socio-cultural changes gained visibility as a political issue in the world of urban work, the real engine of Argentina's economic growth was in the rural areas. One of the ways in which the Socialists visually represented farm workers was through the image of the ‘criollo’, a paradigmatic character of the traditional rural culture. They implied that the values and practices brought by urbanization, immigration and economic growth threatened to make this world disappear. By setting a stark contrast between a past of freedom and a present of poverty and misery, the illustrations exhibit their sympathy for the ‘criollo’s’ way of living (Figure 5).

As evidenced by the success of popular publications that circulated at the time, ‘criollo’ topics attracted the immigrant population interested in adapting to the Argentine society. Seduced by this capability, the socialists resorted to ‘criollismo’.

In summary, despite the fact that the printed propaganda of the socialists pointed out the contradictions of capitalism and the need to combat the entrepreneurial elites through collective organization, it also supported the process

Figure 4. 'Unenlightened and enlightened workers'



Source: José M. Cao, *La Vanguardia*, 5/6/1897, p. 1.

of social and cultural integration of workers. They did so by the representation of labour as a positive value, the nuclear family as a synonym for happiness and personal and social development, and the image of the 'criollo' as a symbol of cultural unification.

Figure 5. 'Past and present of the rural worker'



Source: José María Cao, *La Vanguardia*, 16/1/1897, p. 1.

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Juan Buonuome <jbuonuome@udesa.edu.ar> is a PhD candidate at the Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas ‘Mario J. Buschiazso’, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. He holds a Masters degree in historical research from the San Andrés University and his areas of interests include social and cultural history of contemporary Argentina, history of media and history of socialist culture.

Notes

1. Andreucci, F. (1982). Tra il pianto e il riso. La satira e l’umorismo dei socialisti italiani nel periodo della Seconda Internazionale. *Movimento operaio e socialista*, N° 1: 3-28; Hobsbawm, E. (1978). Men and women in socialist iconography. *History workshop*, N° 6: 121-38.
2. Torre, J. C. (2010). Transformaciones de la sociedad argentina. En R. Russell (Ed.) *Argentina 1910-2010. Balance del siglo* (pp. 167-70). Buenos Aires: Taurus.
3. The web page at IISH of the *La Vanguardia* collection can be found at: <http://search.socialhistory.org/Record/1396844>.

More about the cooperation between CEDLA and IISH can be found at: <http://socialhistory.org/en/region-desks/latin-america-and-caribbean-desk>.

An overview of the Latin American Collections of the International Institute of Social History can be found at: <http://socialhistory.org/en/collections/latin-america-collection-guide>.