Change and Continuity in Paraguayan History - 1811, 1911, 2011

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Paraguay has changed out of all recognition in the two centuries since its independence in 1811 and yet some deep-rooted cultural features provide an enduring link with the past. Even the territory of what we define as Paraguay has altered considerably as a result of the country’s involvement in two major wars. In 1811 the independence leaders of Paraguay had laid claim to significant areas of what is today Argentina and Brazil. Both of these powerful neighbours refused to even recognize Paraguayan independence until many decades later. By 1911 Paraguay’s defeat in the Triple Alliance War (1865-70) had stripped it of roughly one-fifth of its pre-war territory – land comprising part of the modern-day Province of Misiones, Argentina and the State of Matto Grosso, Brazil. The simmering dispute between Paraguay and Bolivia concerning possession of the enormous Chaco region worsened over the subsequent decades and was finally resolved with Paraguayan victory over Bolivia in the Chaco War (1932-35). So by 2011 the definitive borders of the country had been established, giving it ownership of most of the Chaco Boreal, which now comprises 61% of the total area of the country.

Population see-saw

Many of the dramatic changes in Paraguay’s history have been driven by rapid population growth. On the eve of independence the estimated population in what is today Paraguay was no more than 110,000 and most people lived in small rural settlements within a 50-kilometre radius of the capital, Asunción, which had a population of only 7,000. By 1911 the total population has risen to around 600,000, much less than would have been the case had the country not suffered the genocidal effects of the Triple Alliance War, which decimated the population. A recent major study calculated that the population fell from around 420,000-450,000 in 1864 to around 140,000-166,000 in 1870. This represents a loss of 60 to 69% of the pre-war population, far higher even than previous estimates. Recuperation was slow until basic health care was finally extended into rural areas during the second half of the 20th century. As a result, the population growth rate rocketed from the 1960s, nearly tripling in the 40 years from 1972 (2.3m) to 2011 (6.7m).

Waves of immigrants

The aftermath of the Triple Alliance War saw the inflow of a sizeable immigrant population from Western Europe, especially Spain and Italy. Although on a much-reduced scale compared to that in neighbouring
Argentina and Brazil, by 1911 most urban centres had sizeable communities of first generation European immigrants. The 1930s saw the arrival of new migratory flows – Mennonites, fleeing from Russia via China and Canada, followed by eastern Europeans from Poland and Ukraine in the 1940s and 1950s. Immigration of East Asian peoples started from Japan in the 1930s, followed by Koreans and Chinese in the 1960s and 1970s. But the most sizeable immigrant flow, beginning in the 1970s, came from neighbouring Brazil, comprising the so-called brasiguayos, commercial soybean farmers of second-generation Germanic and Slavic extraction. So by 2011 Paraguay had become a far more ethnically heterogeneous and cosmopolitan country than it was in 1911, a phenomenon personified by 31-year old Yolanda Park, one of the country’s top TV presenters, whose parents were Korean.

The explosive population growth continued to pose an enormous challenge to Paraguay. In 2011 the population was 60 times greater than it was in 1811. By contrast, the population of England and Wales had grown from 10.6m in 1811 to 54.5 in 2011, only a fivefold population increase. Yet in the United Kingdom these two centuries witnessed a dramatic economic transformation wrought by industrialisation, and was thereby capable of providing a majority of jobs in the non-agricultural sectors of the economy. By contrast, one of the perennial features of the Paraguayan economy over the past 200 years has been the continued dependence on agriculture as the mainstay of the economy and employment. The only exception was the incipient manufacturing that took place during the short period of state-led development (1840-65) initiated by President Carlos Antonio López prior to the Triple Alliance War, and to which over 300 skilled British contract workers made a significant contribution.

**Paraguay’s primary products**

At independence, foreign trade was virtually confined to the export of yerba mate tea, hides and tobacco. By 1911 there had been considerable diversification of exports, into cotton, sugar, tannin extract, timber and corned beef, much of which was produced by a British company, Liebigs. During the second half of the 20th century the agricultural economy underwent a radical transformation as virtually all of these crops and products were replaced by soybean and chilled/frozen meat produced by commercial farmers and modern cattle-ranchers. In the process, the area under agricultural and intensive cattle production expanded rapidly, forcing a growing migration of under-employed school-leavers to urban areas and, more recently, into economic exile. By 2011, 810,000 young people, 48% of all those aged between 15 and 29, were either unemployed or underemployed.

One striking feature of this evolution of the economy is that in 2011 Paraguay remained as reliant on the export of ‘primary products’ as it had been in 1911 and 1811. Despite the massive 7,000 MW of electricity generating capacity from its joint ownership with Brazil of the Itaipú hydro-electric plant, Paraguay has not experienced any energy-intensive industrialisation process in the period after 1980 when the first turbines came on stream. The failure to use the country’s energy resource to electrify the railway system has also contributed to a dramatic shift in inland goods and passenger transport. From 1909, two years before the centenary of independence, the British-owned Paraguay Central Railway reached the border town of Encarnación, a distance of 441 kilometres. Its daily service from Asunción to Encarnación was of far greater
economic importance than the hazardous alternative by road, especially after inter-connection was made with the Argentine railway system in 1913. Yet by 2011 a triangle of highways linked Asunción, Encarnación and Ciudad del Este and the railway only operated a 30-mile Sunday service to Areguá for tourists. (See also box on ‘Paraguayan Railways’.)

All-embracing agriculture = destructive deforestation

The over-reliance on agriculture and the associated expansion of the agricultural frontier has decimated the dense forest that once covered most of Paraguay. In 2011 less than 2% of the semi-tropical ‘Atlantic’ forest that previously covered much of eastern Paraguay remained. In the decade up to 2011 an even more rapid process deforestation began to take place in the Chaco, at an average rate of 2,500 acres per day. In both parts of the country the destruction of the natural environment has been led by brasiguayo soybean farmers, encouraged by weak enforcement of Paraguay’s environmental protection laws. As a result the visual landscape of the country has altered out of all recognition over the past 200 years. This is most striking in the Departments of Alto Paraná and Itapúa, which extend to the Brazilian and Argentine borders respectively. In 1911, the indentured labourers who picked and carried yerba mate on their backs were called ‘miners’ precisely because they used lamps to guide themselves through the dense forests. In 2011 this region of the country now resembled the flat plains of the mid-western states of the United States.

Hydro-electric potential

While forest cover is fast disappearing, Paraguay’s other great natural resource – the Paraguay-Paraná river system – is making a greater contribution to economic development. The tapping of the enormous hydro-energy potential of the Paraná basin has led to the development of the Itaipú and Yacyretá hydro-electric plants with Brazil and Argentina respectively. Until the Three Gorges hydro project in the Peoples Republic of China is completed, Itaipú remains, at 14,000MW, the largest hydro plant in the world. In the process of its construction, the majestic Guairá waterfalls, a hitherto emblematic feature of the country, visible yet inaccessible in 1911, disappeared under water when the Lake Itaipú dam was filled. A new canal and lock system around both hydro plants, together with extensive dredging, have greatly increased commercial transport on the Paraná and Paraguay Rivers and by 2011 the bulk of Paraguay’s soybean and other grain exports were transported on enormous barge convoys to the River Plate. (See also box on ‘Hydroelectric Power’.)

Society on the move

The rapid population expansion and associated migration to urban areas has also put strains on the capacity of the state to provide basic services to its citizens. However, despite the difficulties, the educational and health profile of Paraguayans has improved markedly over the past century. Educational enrolment in 1911 was little more than 10% of the primary school age population. By contrast, in 2011 Paraguay had achieved universal primary education, although completion rates for secondary school remain far below the Latin American average because of a high drop-out rate. In 1912 the Universidad Nacional (founded in 1889) was the only
university in the country, with only 116 registered students, the vast majority studying law. By 2011 there were 49 recognised universities and the number of enrolled university students was around 150,000.

There has been a similar improvement in the basic health profile of the population as a result of the expansion of public health services and disease control programmes. In 1911 malaria, tuberculosis and hookworm were still endemic in rural areas, with leishmaniasis and leprosy still common illnesses. Poor diet and living conditions contributed to a low life expectancy which was worsened by the virtual absence of doctors in rural areas. The infant mortality rate (under one year of age) had fallen from around 80 per thousand live births in 1960 to around 20 per 1,000 live births in 2011. However, the maternal mortality rate was still far above the Latin American average due to the limited coverage of MCH (Maternal and Child Health) programmes in rural areas.

**The exclusionary nature of Paraguayan society**

In spite of these improvements in the delivery of basic health and education, the culture of the public administration system in 2011 continued to reflect the exclusionary nature of Paraguayan society inherited from the past. This was built on an extremely unequal system of land tenure, which remained little changed throughout most of the 20th century. In the absence of a merit-based system of recruitment and promotion, patronage and nepotism continued to strongly influence the inner workings of ministries and public sector bodies. Although a targeted anti-poverty programme in the poorest departments of San Pedro and Caazapá got off the ground from 2006, public sector workers, especially in the judiciary, continued to display negative attitudes towards the poor majority that were surprisingly similar to views reported from a century earlier.

Efforts to bring the state closer to the citizen have been very slow in Paraguay. Even the basic parameters of citizenship were very slow to evolve. It was not until 1914, three years after the centenary of independence, that a law was passed extending the registration of births and deaths by the State, the registro civil, from Asunción to include the rest of the country. Although a semblance of local government already existed in 1911, with 72 municipalities, it was only in 1991 that municipal mayors were elected by citizens for the first time – prior to that they were all appointed by the President of the Republic. Judicial reform has been similarly slow and treatment of the rural poor by the judicial system remains grossly inadequate despite the construction of six brand new Court Buildings throughout the country during the 1990s. Legal redress for the poor remains an illusion as they continue to be at the mercy of unscrupulous lawyers, in a fashion also not dissimilar to 100 years ago.

**Coup and counter coup**

This continuity in the gross weaknesses of the public administration system is not surprising when viewed against the limited democratisation that has characterised most of Paraguay's life as an independent nation. Despite the much vaunted 'liberalism' prevalent in 1911, politics remained the preserve of a tiny majority, who settled their differences by coup and counter-coup rather than appealing to the democratic wishes of the people. Numbers on the electoral register were tiny in relation to the size of the adult population. Recourse
to the mass of the population was primarily for cannon fodder at times of armed conflict. In fact, for 100 years from 1911 to 2011 there were no less than 20 occasions on which the government changed as a result of a military-led coup, as well as countless more failed coups. It was not until President Lugo was elected to the presidency in 2008 that for the first time in Paraguayan history a political party replaced another in a democratic election.

**Cultural clues to Paraguayan identity**

It is noteworthy that Paraguayan culture has demonstrated great resilience in spite of enormous structural changes in the country over the past two centuries. Popular religiosity remains strong although the influence of the Catholic Church has diminished considerably. While in 1911 over 96% of the population were nominally Catholic, the actual presence of the church was already extremely limited in rural areas, and became increasingly dependent on foreign-born priests and nuns. By 2011 a growing presence, within rural and urban communities, of missionaries from the evangelical branch of the Protestant Church, Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses had reduced the proportion of nominal Catholics to little more than 75% of the population.

Culturally isolated for many decades before and during the Stroessner dictatorship, the “island surrounded by land” (as Augusto Roa Bastos famously described Paraguay) opened rapidly to the outside world during the decade prior to the bicentenary under the influence of the global IT revolution. ‘Foreign’ cultural influences have clearly gathered strength. Cachaca and cumbia have replaced the polka and the guarania as the preferred music and dance of young people. Yet unlike virtually anywhere else in Latin America, most people in Paraguay still speak an indigenous language – Guaraní. Indeed, the most striking example of the strength and identity of Paraguayan culture is this endurance of the national language in the everyday lives of Paraguayans. In 1811 all Paraguayans spoke Guaraní, and Paraguay remained almost completely monolingual in Guaraní at least until the beginning of the 20th century. By 1911 less than 5% of the population, almost exclusively concentrated in Asunción, did not speak Guaraní.

**Still a common tongue?**

Most significantly, there is little evidence of a decline in Guaraní usage despite the rapid rural-to-urban migration that has taken place since the 1980s. The census (2002) showed that Guaraní was still the favored language in Paraguay, preferred by 59 percent of households compared with 36 percent of households that preferred Spanish. A further 5 percent of households spoke other languages, mainly Portuguese, German, and Korean. In rural areas, Guaraní remained by far the predominant language, preferred by 83 percent of the population, and more households there spoke other languages (8.9%) than spoke Spanish (8.4%).

Yet the national language has endured in spite of the extreme hostility towards it shown by the Paraguayan elite and the state throughout almost all the nation’s 200-year history. In 1911 it was still officially prohibited to speak Guaraní in schools, a situation that did not really come to end until the 1960s [1]. Even in 2011, the Paraguayan state, with rare exceptions, does not communicate with its citizens in the national language.
Medical students at the Universidad Nacional are not required to pass an exam in Guaraní as part of their training, in the judicial system there is no provision for defendants to give evidence in Guaraní, and Guaraní still does not even figure on the passport of Paraguayan citizens. This contradictory attitude towards Guaraní – at one and the same time praising it as “the embodiment of Paraguayan identity”, while at the same time showing disdain for Guaraní speakers – is at the heart of the complex belief system that maintains an exclusionary style of development.

Towards the next centenary

Many of the problems facing Paraguay can be traced to this exclusionary style of development that has characterised the country’s history during the first 200 years of its independent life – the limited nature of democracy, the gross inequalities in income and land tenure, the venality of many powerful politicians and administrators, and the disdainful attitude toward the poor and marginalised groups. Indeed, the challenge of the next century will be for Paraguay’s leaders to break with this tradition and promote a genuinely inclusive style of development in which the poor majority are allowed to play a more important role in the economy. With the necessary political will and a massive investment in high quality public education, there is no reason why richly-endowed Paraguay should not be able to provide a sustainable and decent standard of living to all of its citizens by 2111.

1 A striking example of the elite disdain for guarani appears in the postscript to the major commemorative album sponsored by the Paraguayan government on the first centenary of independence in 1911: “As for the removal from the national education system of Guaraní, that dialect or archaic indigenous language which serves no purpose whatsoever, it only remains to carry this out, as a crucial first step in our enormous campaign. Yes, sir! To completely de-Guaranize ‘in order to ensure that the roots of that primitive forest do not regain their control in the open furrows’ and then to crisscross the land everywhere with railway lines, in order to spill out European immigration in every direction, in the struggle for its expansion.” (Monte Domecq’ 1911, author’s translation)