REVIVAL AFTER THE GREAT WAR
Revival after the Great War
Rebuild, Remember, Repair, Reform

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Post-war picture postcard of the rebuilt city centre of Leuven (Belgium).
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But in our lives there was no repetition; nothing of the past survived, nothing came back. It was reserved for us to participate to the full in that which history formerly distributed, sparingly and from time to time, to a single country, to a single century.

At most, one generation had gone through a revolution, another experienced a putsch, the third a war, the fourth a famine, the fifth national bankruptcy: and many blessed countries, blessed generations, bore none of these. But we, who are sixty today and who, de jure still have a space of time before us, what have we not seen, not suffered, not lived through? We have ploughed through the catalogue of every conceivable catastrophe back and forth (and we have not yet come to the last page).

Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (1941)
Fig. 1. Roberto J. Payró’s residence at 327 Brugmann Avenue, Brussels. A plaque on the façade indicates that the writer lived here between 1909 and 1922. Picture taken by the author in May 2018.
An Argentine Witness of the Occupation and Reconstruction of Belgium

The Writings of Roberto J. Payró (1918-1922)

María Inés Tato

In 1909 the renowned Argentine writer and journalist Roberto J. Payró (1867-1928) settled down in Brussels to work as a correspondent for the Buenos Aires newspaper La Nación. He was the author of notable accounts of manners and a pioneer of travel chronicles. His contributions covered different issues from culture to politics, and showed the insightful and ironic nature that characterised his work. When the First World War broke out, he decided to remain in Belgium with his family to provide his readers with first-hand information on the conflict, despite the risks and discomfort involved in that choice.

After the German invasion, he admitted that his observations about the war encountered serious difficulties because of the restrictions imposed by censorship and in the growing informational isolation. However, he offered a priceless testimony of daily life in Brussels during the invasion and occupation and carried out a thorough enquiry about the German incursion in Dinant, where the honorary vice-consul of the Argentine Republic – Rémy Himmer – was executed.¹ Payró also investigated the death of Julio Lemaire, vice-consul and ambassador of the General Argentine Consulate in Antwerp during the bombardment of that city in October 1914.² These cases were analysed by the Argentine government, which accepted the explanations given by the German authorities and considered the diplomatic incidents closed.³ Nevertheless, Payró’s reports had a great impact on public opinion, being reproduced not only in Argentina but also in the European press.⁴ As a result, the occupation
authorities decided to silence him. On 22 September 1915 his home was raided, many of his writings were requisitioned, and the writer was put under strict surveillance during the rest of the conflict. Therefore, his journalistic contributions were interrupted until February 1919, when he was able to restart them. He continued as correspondent for La Nación until 1922, when he returned to Argentina.

This chapter will deal with the chronicles written immediately after the war (1918-1922). Some of these chronicles recalled Payró’s experience of the occupation – such as those concerning the deportation of Belgian workers to Germany, the local impact of the German revolution of November 1918, and the sudden armistice. The memory of the war also surfaced in some public scandals related to war profiteering and collaboration. However, the vast majority of his new articles were dedicated to the future of Belgium and Europe. Unlike those referring to the war, these abandoned the intimate and emotional tenor to adopt instead a more neutral and informative tone.

The importance of these chronicles lies, in the first place, in their character as external testimonies of the European post-war reconstruction and reform endeavours. In the second place, they show how Europe continued serving as a benchmark for Latin America, despite the negative impact of the war on her image as a beacon of civilisation.6

An Eyewitness to Post-War Material and Political Reconstruction in Belgium

Shortly after the German invasion, Payró had travelled around cities and small villages devastated by the German army, an itinerary that he had called “a pilgrimage to the ruins”.7 After the war, he repeated the experience, going down to the principal theatres of war: Nieuwpoort, Diksmuide, Ypres, and their surroundings, “razed to the ground [...] regions that currently are sterile swamps, fields of devastation [...] a bald lunar landscape”8.

The Great War had bequeathed extremely high levels of material destruction, a huge burden for Belgium’s recovery and reconstruction.9 As our chronicler pointed out, the economic rebirth was

the most arduous task of this heroic, martyr country, tortured first, over-exploited later, and which, without equipment and tools, with its industrial buildings razed, without building materials, will need years to return to the condition previous to the war, and it will only accomplish that with super-human efforts, no matter how much it gets as compensation for damages.10
In June 1919, the Argentine writer stated that “we live very harshly here - almost as in wartime - because urgent material needs do not disappear or diminish with the illusion of the future.” He reported that one quarter of the Belgian population was unemployed, surviving through government aid, in a context of high inflation and salary depreciation, which led employed workers to demand “salaries apparently huge, but in fact hardly enough”. These demands complicated the recovery of the industry, also shaken by lack of equipment, capital, raw materials and markets. The housing crisis was extremely serious and - like unemployment - particularly hit the war veterans, who found the compensation and pensions insufficient due to the high cost of living. As Payró asserted, official aid through endowments for veterans “does not improve the sad situation of those who - compulsory or voluntarily - spilled their blood and risked their lives for the common will”. Despite the depth of the crisis and the high public debt to cover social emergencies - channelled through an advanced social legislation - Payró reported the incipient rebirth of some industries and foreign trade. As a result, he predicted the recovery to prewar economic levels.

The success of the economic recovery resided in what he considered an original and praiseworthy system adopted during the war: the “government of reconstruction”, the continuity in peacetime of the 1914-18 “sacred union”:

The cooperation of the main political parties in the Executive Power of a country, with a participation and responsibility proportional to their strength, is an event [...] exemplary and new [...] Such a sharing out of influences and obligations was usual in the parliaments, but not in the governments.

The collaboration - embodied in a coalition government led by Prime Ministers León Delacroix first (1918-1920) and Henry Carton de Wiart later (1920-1921) - implied the balancing of different ideological tendencies and provided a necessary political stability, which favoured economic reconstruction.

In addition to the government of national unity, the Belgian rebirth rested on another pillar: the establishment of universal suffrage, as a direct result of the war. In other words, the right to vote was compensation for the blood tax paid by the male population through army service in wartime and, to a lesser extent, by women, a consequence of “equality in suffering and resistance”. Electoral reform granted suffrage to all men over 21 years old and also to some categories of women: former political prisoners, widows (not remarried) and widowed mothers of dead soldiers and executed civilians. In this sense, the Great War had meant the crisis of the old systems and had led to a “republic without the name”: “[f]or the first time in History, the war will have cooperated - direct, immediate and effectively - to the
progress of mankind, not as war but in its character of revolution”. A revolution rooted in the principles of 1789, with universal effects, including Germany and even Russia.22

Payró considered that Belgian political exceptionality was based on the moderation of its socialism – represented by the Belgian Labour Party – which contrasted with the post-war ideological extremisms: “although [the party] names itself revolutionary, it is evolutionist, and bolshevism does not prey on it”23

[it] distinguishes itself for the moderation of its methods and for the realism of its propaganda [...] it could be easily confused with French radicalism or the American advanced democracy.24

Socialist temperance would precisely explain that “the reconstruction of Belgium works with less slowness than the one of other countries devastated by the war”.25

Payró and the Peace Conference

The Argentine writer recorded in his contributions to La Nación widespread bewilderment and uncertainty in post-war Europe:

Europe – and, with her, the entire world [...] – revolves nowadays in the darkness and the vagueness of chaos. She is fully in a revolutionary epoch; its upheavals have diverse intensity but appear everywhere without exception.26

Payró’s expectations were set against the background of the Peace Conference. He hoped that it would contribute “to establish the union of the nations and to create a new method to solve the border issues, as otherwise the terrifying experiment we have just witnessed will be useless”.27 A crucial point that the peace conference had to solve was the German question, which was how to punish the defeated and to avoid it becoming a new threat to peace. The Allied nations gave opposing answers to this pressing dilemma, from the United States’ conciliatory proposals to the demands of the recalcitrant French and Belgians – whose reconstruction, at least in theory, was dependent on indemnities for the German occupation.

The Belgian socialists intervened in those debates with a proposal that, according to our writer, indicated “equity and serenity”, stating:
that only a peace of justice can avoid future wars; that the right of peoples to self-determination is violated in Poland, seriously compromising peace, when German communities are incorporated to that country; that they cannot admit that the strongest powers seize the German colonies invoking the rights of the victors; that depriving Germany or any other nation of raw materials and colonial markets creates a dangerous and unsustainable situation; that they do not accept neither that Germany is forced to sign a blank check under the pretext of reparation, nor making the balance of the damages caused by her without her intervention, thus depriving her of defense, nor that she is reduced to a kind of economic slavery. 28

On the other hand, the socialists demanded guarantees that neither Belgium nor France would again be attacked by Germany. To prevent that risk, they proposed disarmament instead of a new arms race or the military occupation of German territory. 29

In the peace conference, the sternest position towards Germany prevailed. The Treaty of Versailles, signed on 28 June 1919, included many harsh provisions designed to compensate France and Belgium for the damage inflicted by the occupation, and to reduce German military power. 30 For its part, Belgium received much less of the expected amount of reparations, since the Allies considered that the damage and military losses suffered were less than those of other countries. 31 Although the Belgian coalition parties were overall dissatisfied with the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, considering them an insufficient reward for Belgium’s sacrifice in wartime, the socialists took a slightly more positive view. They considered that at least the Treaty had put an end to the nightmare of the war, and offered some promising prospects, such as the liberation of Poland and the League of Nations. 32 However, the socialist leaders continued to criticise the spirit of the Treaty and to warn about the risks it involved for long-term peace. In the words of Louis De Brouckère, socialist delegate to the League of Nations in the 1920s, quoted by Payró:

Nowadays, Germany is defeated. The Allies subject her at will, impose on her a rough and hard treaty that, from a certain point of view, is unfair, and the Germans are told: “These are the legal rules of punishment”. And, because we are fairly outraged due to Germany’s disloyalty, we tell her: “You will be squashed in Europe, without even the opportunity to invoke the same warranties that we have created for you and for us” […] I took part in the fight and I keep my sorrows. But, not because I have contributed to the triumph of law, I have to despise now the very idea of justice in front of the beaten enemy. 33
Émile Vandervelde, socialist Minister of Justice and delegate to the peace conference, also condemned the terms of the Treaty imposed on Germany:

Reactionaries have declared that Germany had to pay everything, that is to say the hundreds of thousands of millions that the war has costed, when they perfectly know that the German people will never be able to produce enough to pay such a sum.\textsuperscript{34}

Payró sided with the socialist leader and with his gloomy prognosis for the post-war period:

The picture that the future presents […] is in fact frightening, and it would be desirable that the Briands,\textsuperscript{35} the Lloyd Georges,\textsuperscript{36} the Clemenceaus,\textsuperscript{37} see it in that way, as the Caillaux\textsuperscript{38} and other excommunicated persons for excess of perspicacity saw it in advance.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{An Observer and Mediator between Europe and Latin America}

Payró was undoubtedly a subtle observer of the social and political realities of his time and acted as a mediator between the events in European and his Argentine readers. In his chronicles he always tried to make the experiences understandable to his audience, translating them into a shared cultural code and establishing parallels with Argentine culture. During the post-war period, Payró’s aims as a journalist were not only to keep his readers well informed about the dramatic events of this time of turmoil, but also to extract from the European experience lessons that could be useful to his native country. Despite the crisis of civilisation produced by the Great War, the Old Continent continued to provide tools and examples to the young Latin American nations, where economic and political modernisation had started late, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Generally, Payró drew attention to some developments that could apply to Argentina to solve specific problems, but without going more deeply into their concrete adaptation.

He paid particular attention to some innovative changes in Belgium that could serve as a model for other countries, including Argentina. In the first place, Payró considered “that knowledge of the conquests of modern law [is] useful to our country”, mainly Belgian social security legislation. He especially emphasised the protection of the old by means of a progressive pension system, based on the principles of assistance and sharing.\textsuperscript{40}
In second place he addressed a pressing and global social problem: a critical housing shortage:

The entire world currently encounters [...] the same difficulty that in some countries has serious proportions: the shortage of houses for rent, and above all, of housing for workers. This problem, which deeply concerns Buenos Aires, all the more reason interests the Belgians and the French, who have seen many of their villages and towns destroyed or razed by the war. But the lack and shortage of housing are also observed in Italy, England, the United States, as well as in Buenos Aires… It can be said that the problem is universal.41

Post-war Belgium witnessed the emergence of a national organisation, sponsored by the government, devoted to promoting the construction and/or leasing of dwellings which supported local initiatives. Among its projects, Payró praised the design of neighbourhood gardens as part of a renewed and hygienic urban model, and the central role attributed to the communes.42 He considered that if Belgium was able to accomplish this new urban initiative, his own country should adopt it without excuses.

Finally, the last Belgian development proposed by Payró as a model to consider in Argentina was the political coalition system.43 Since 1912, Argentina had gone through a political democratisation process based on universal suffrage, which had led to the traditional conservative elite's loss of office and the ascent of the principal opposition organisation, the Radical Party. However, unlike in Belgium, political parties did not have a well defined ideological profile, and the ruling party and the opposition were engaged in constant and irreconcilable disputes.44 The Belgian political parties’ experience of coexistence and conciliation during the war was unusual for the Argentine, who certainly considered it as a precious model for his country’s turbulent political system.

To conclude, during his stay in Belgium, between 1909 and 1922, Roberto J. Payró witnessed the dramatic hours that would herald the “short twentieth century”.45 From his outpost as correspondent of the Argentine newspaper La Nación he observed the outbreak of the First World War, the invasion and occupation of Belgium by German troops and the first years of a disrupted post-war period. His columns transmitted his impressions and emotions, based on direct experience of the events.

The Great War unleashed a profound crisis, which led to the questioning of the main pillars of the social and political order prevailing until 1914. Demands for reform spread across the continent and even globally. After the armistice, Payró paid close attention to the developments in Europe, always through the prism of Belgium. He tried to extract lessons to apply in his native country, such as those related to the
social question and the political system. He observed both areas as promising fields to implement reforms in Argentina, following the Belgian example.

Moreover, in the post-war scene two main issues captured his interest and were the axis of his reflections: the reconstruction of Belgium and the reconfiguration of the European geopolitical map. Concerning the first point, he sketched a discouraging prospect of the war’s legacy of destruction and of the economic and social situation in the immediate post-war period. However, he also perceived that the formidable task of the reconstruction of Belgium was starting to produce positive results. In that assessment Payró attributed an important role to the attitude of the political parties: in pursuit of the country’s recovery they postponed some of their programmatical demands. In particular, he granted a vital role to socialism, whose moderation in times of widespread ideological radicalisation would act as a guarantee of the social and political stability necessary for reconstruction.

Regarding the new international order designed by the peace conference, he sided again with the criticisms of the Belgian socialists. He advocated for equitable treatment towards Germany, which contemplated both the need to take moral and material responsibility for its acts during the war and its effective capacity to pay. Like the Belgian socialists, Payró warned that excessively harsh treatment of the defeated power could lead to renewed militarism and to a new global catastrophe. His diagnosis would prove to be accurate, although he would not live to witness its tragic development.
Notes


2 Argentine, Buenos Aires, Archivo del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto (AMREC), Fondo Primera Guerra Mundial (FPGM), AH/00044/1, “Fusilamiento del vicecónsul argentino en Dinant Sr. Himmer”; and AH/00044/2, “Muerte del canciller del Consulado Gral. en Amberes, Sr. Lemaire, a consecuencia del bombardeo de esa plaza”.

For instance, the Parisian *Le Figaro* translated Payró’s chronicles on this event, later published by the Belgian *Le XXe siècle* (“Pires que des sauvages. Les massacres de Dinant. Le Consul Argentin, M. Himmer, fusillé”, 17 December 1914) and *L’Echo Belge* (“A Dinant”, 26 December 1914).

3 The Argentine government tried to arrange for his repatriation, but the German authorities refused and demanded that Payró stay in Germany for several months before his return to Buenos Aires; this proposal was rejected by the writer (AMREC-FPGM, AH/00056/1, “Bélgica. Detención del ciudadano argentino Roberto J. Payró por autoridades alemanas en Bruselas”).


4 Payró, “Pilgrimage to the ruins” (published between 4 and 12 December 1914), in Payró, *Corresponsal de Guerra*, 711-744.

5 Payró, Corresponsal de Guerra, 1053-1054.


Payró, “Reliquias de la guerra” (dated May 1920 and published on 29 June 1920), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1136.

Payró, “Las pensiones a la vejez en Bélgica” (dated December 1920 and published on 6 February 1921), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1183-1184; Sophie de Schaepdrijver, La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale, 297-298.


Payró, “A guisa de prólogo” (dated 9 December 1918 and published on 27 February 1919), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1046.

Payró, “La unión hace la fuerza” (dated 20 November 1920 and published on 10 January 1921), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1170. The coalition gathered together Catholics, socialists and liberals.

Payró, “Política positivista” (dated May 1920 and published on 29 July 1920), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1149.

Payró, “El discurso del trono y el programa de gobierno, 1” (dated 12 December 1918 and published on 27 February 1919), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1048.


Payró, “El discurso del trono y el programa de gobierno, 1”, in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1047.


Payró, “El socialismo se define en Bélgica” (published on 12 June 1921), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1215.

Payró, “Un ultimátum socialista”, in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1133.


Payró, “Cartas informativas 4” (published on 5 March 1919), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1068.

“Cartas informativas 4”, in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1094.

Ibid., 1094.


Payró, “Bélgica y el tratado de paz” (dated September 1919 and published on 7 December 1919), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1118-1119.

Quoted in Payró, “Bélgica y las naciones. Un discurso notable” (dated April 1921 and published on 27 May 1921), in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1214-1215.

Quoted in Payró, “El socialismo se define en Bélgica”, in Payró, Correspondal de guerra, 1218.

Aristide Briand, Prime Minister of France.

David Lloyd George, British Prime Minister.
Georges Clemenceau, Former Prime Minister of France.
Joseph Caillaux, leader of the French Radical Party, pacifist and in favour of a peace without annexations or compensation.
Payró, “El socialismo se define en Bélgica”, in Payró, Corresponsal de guerra, 1219.
Payró, “Las pensiones a la vejez en Bélgica”, in Payró, Corresponsal de guerra, 1183.
Payró, “El problema de la habitación”, in Payró, Corresponsal de guerra, 1139.
“El problema de la habitación”, in Payró, Corresponsal de guerra, 1139-1140.
Payró, “A guisa de prólogo” (published on 27 December 1919), in Payró, Corresponsal de guerra, 1120.

About Argentine political life in this period and its main conflicts, see: María Inés Tato, Viento de Fronda. Liberalismo, conservadurismo y democracia en la Argentina, 1911-1932 (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2004).