

# Meaningful mobilities: the experience of underground travel in the Buenos Aires *Subte*, 1913–1944

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## Abstract

The paper explores the experience of travelling on Buenos Aires' Underground Railways (*Subte*) during the first decades of the twentieth-century. Reconstructing representations of passengers and their experiences through visual and textual sources, the paper shows how this underground mobility was a meaningful practice that expressed ambivalent sentiments towards progress and the rhythm of modern urban life. On the one hand, there was popular fascination with new technologies as well as a celebration and exaltation of this encapsulated mobility as a rational organisation of space in relation to time. On the other hand, the *Subte* was criticised as a form of regimentation and dehumanisation which turned passengers into automatons.

*Key words* underground railways, Buenos Aires, travel experiences, culture

## Introduction

In the context of rapid and spectacular urban growth,<sup>1</sup> on 1 December 1913 Buenos Aires inaugurated its first underground railway line in response to the demand for rapid and mass transportation. It was the first city in Latin America to implement this mode of transport and the thirteenth in the world as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Despite its early implementation, Buenos Aires' Underground Railways (*Subte*) was at no point the principal means of public transport of the city, but it did create new urban experiences and modes of perceiving and symbolizing progress.

The *Subte* also helped to cast the Argentina capital as a modern metropolis. As an American observer commented in 1909: 'In a short time Buenos Ayres is to have an underground railway system [...] and then indeed it will deserve to be called a full-fledged world metropolis'.<sup>3</sup> By the centenary of the Republic in 1910, international figures regarded Buenos Aires as 'the Paris of South America' - principally due to its architecture, infrastructure, and cosmopolitanism.<sup>4</sup> The role of the city as agent of modernisation was an idea mostly shaped by the dichotomy between 'Civilisation' and 'Barbarism' that was recognised in 1845 by Domingo F. Sarmiento, one

of Argentina's most influential intellectuals. For him, the city and Europe represented Civilisation, while Barbarism was signified by the colonial past, the countryside (the *Pampas*) and its typical inhabitant (the *gaucho*).

The idea of Buenos Aires as a European city is representative of a period of progress which placed the city in the vanguard of Latin America. The idea is exemplified by the words of the mayor who, in 1913, praised the underground railway as 'the most eloquent proof of material economic development in this metropolis, and of its power of adjustment to include everything that stands for progress'. Highlighting his city's pre-eminent position in the region, the Mayor added: 'we are lucky - living in this part of America, to be the first to enjoy such a great benefit, like those great centres called London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, New York, quintessentially model cities in terms of building achievements'.<sup>5</sup>

The construction of the *Subte* by foreign companies reinforced the aspirations of incorporating Argentina into the international market.<sup>6</sup> However, most relevant in cultural terms, the acceleration of urban journeys made possible by the underground railway symbolised the material progress of the nation: 'velocity is the foremost characteristic of progress and, hence, the permanent eagerness of the big cities is always to reduce distance', claimed the Central Society of Architects on the fourth anniversary of the *Subte*. In this sense, the *Subte* was 'a sign of the economic potential of a centre' because 'the more important and intense is the commercial movement of a country, the faster its transport service has to be'.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the *Subte* reinforced the idea of scientific and technological innovation benefiting urban life as a whole by resolving congestion problems, contributing to suburbanisation and, mainly, providing comfortable, fast, safe and relatively cheap transport to the masses. For urban planners the underground railway would contribute to normalising street traffic perceived as congested, chaotic and dangerous. The reduction of distance and the saving of time were not only appreciated in economic terms but were also seen as signs of social progress. For example, one of the most advertised benefits of the underground railway was the improvement of the health and morale of workers who could return home to have lunch with their families.<sup>8</sup>

However, Buenos Aires' modernity was a contradictory process characterised by initial confidence in progress and then disillusion when the material and social consequences became most visible (and irreversible) during the first decades of the twentieth-century. Urbanists diagnosed that Buenos Aires had become a huge, but sick metropolis. In the 1930s several intellectuals were sceptical about the city as an agent of modernisation. Anti-imperialism, and particularly a sentiment of Anglophobia (due to the domination of British capital in transport and trade), impregnated left and right ideologies; the Liberal ideas of a break with the past and of cosmopolitanism began to be questioned in the search for a national identity that resulted in a conservative modernity.

Despite the cultural meanings that the underground railway triggered or embodied, neither mobility as a meaningful daily practice nor the *Subte* as

a cultural artefact have been the subject of extensive investigation. Urban historians have approached the transport system of Buenos Aires as a significant factor in explaining urban growth and land use, whereas economic historians have focused on public and private affairs.<sup>9</sup> Recent scholars of the cultural history of transport have focused more on infrastructure and the role of the State and planners rather than on the practice of travelling.<sup>10</sup> This paper, by contrast, explores representations of underground passengers and their experiences of travel. The key idea is that mobility is a meaningful practice that allows us to see tensions related to technology-based progress and life in large modern cities.

As experience in other cities shows, descending into the underground has always provoked a mixture of wonder and fear. Underground travel tended to be perceived as an oddity as it linked a modern practice of mobility with past cultural representations such as the catacombs, the Underworld, the Hell, the necropolis.<sup>11</sup> The Buenos Aires *Subte* was no exception. In 1913 the popular magazine *P.B.T.* exclaimed that 'before only the dead went to the pit; now the livings are buried and they rush about above and under the ground'.<sup>12</sup> However, the oddity of dwelling in the place of the dead was represented differently from the typical hellish representations of underground railways in other cities. Those representations were more related to the smoke-laden tunnel (London), the hot atmosphere (New York) or tragic accidents (Paris, after 1903 Métro fire). The comparisons with the necropolis in Buenos Aires were based on physical features, for example, the architecture of the wrought-iron entrance, the absence of natural lighting, or solitude and darkness in contrast to street life. However, that comparison, mainly produced by the popular view and humoristic discourses, did not represent a radical reaction. If *porteños* widely accepted the *Subte* as a new form of urban mobility, this was for two reasons. First, by the turn of the twentieth century the electrification of the underground railway had overcome the hellish representation. Second, the negative representations Buenos Aires' traffic used to have: congestion, lack of strict controls, bad conditions of streets paving, problems concerning timetables and delays, the perils of level crossings, the parking of private cars in central streets. Collisions and fatal accidents, which used to be recurrent, stressed the perception that the traffic chaos inevitably made the street unsafe.

Although the perception of (descending into) the subterranean space is relevant to understanding ambivalent representations of progress, this paper focuses on *Subte* passengers and their experiences of travelling first on inauguration days of lines from 1913 and then more regularly as commuters until 1944 when the underground network was completed. First-day travel informs us about the cultural impact of novelty, and routine daily use reveals 'ordinary' experiences of the *Subte*. The analysis focuses on crowds, speed, time and the quality of travel, and links these elements to ideas of progress and modes of experiencing the city.

Representations and practices were reconstructed via a wide but fragmented range of visual and textual sources. Source materials include the main

newspapers and popular magazines published between 1913 and 1944, public and business records and some 400 images in photographic archives. An exhaustive search of Argentinean fiction, poetry and essays shows that the underground railway was not as common a topic as other means of transport - compared with London, for example.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the *Subte* appears as a target of critique in the work of important Argentinean writers such as Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (1895–1964), Roberto Arlt (1900–42) and to a lesser extent, Baldomero Fernández Moreno (1886–1950).

Proportionate to the numbers who used the *Subte*, very few records were ever made about user experiences and opinions. Scattered texts and images mostly express the enthusiastic or pessimistic views of the press, caricaturists and writers, rather than the view of ‘the average’ passenger. Nonetheless, those discourses do represent urban culture as the printed word circulated widely in Argentina. The principal newspapers and popular magazines had a huge readership,<sup>14</sup> and new publishing houses made more accessible a broad range of literature via cheap books.<sup>15</sup> Most importantly, the free, public and compulsory education system produced an educated public which read habitually. Reading became so common during the daily journey that transport companies used to publish their own magazines for passengers.

### Inauguration and play

The opening days of the underground service for the general public were literally ‘extraordinary’ because they constituted an unusual, short-lived event, marked by joy, curiosity and fascination with novelty. Pessimism, cynicism and satire lived together with the enthusiasm expressed by officials. Such a mixture was partly produced by impressions of the strangeness of inhabiting the underground space, but the presence and behaviour of the curious crowd during the opening days was also one of the first signs of ambivalence towards progress.

Crowds of people attended the opening of the first underground line in 1913. As late as the 1930s, when the underground railways were familiar, public curiosity was renewed at every new inauguration as each underground line looked a little different and included new elements such as turnstiles and escalators that provoked enthusiasm and fascination similar to that experienced by the passengers who used the escalator for the first time in London (1911). During its inauguration, London’s Earls Court Station (Piccadilly Line) was full of travellers as the ‘moving-staircases’ were an unexpected curiosity. A month later it was reported that some still people spent hours going up and down the ‘fascinating apparatus’, leaving the station only when the last train was departing.<sup>16</sup>

The press tended to celebrate the implementation of the *Subte*, reinforcing the ruling elite’s aspiration to show off the city as a symbol of progress through technological innovations and by advertising private sector investment in new modes of transport. Local urban triumphalism was reflected

by the propagandistic manner in which the inauguration day was depicted. Crowds gave the opening the feel of a popular celebration - thus signalling the success of the underground railway - and the press emphasised the presence of the large number of people.

Newspaper commentaries were eloquent about the presence of a multitude identified as a 'massive flux', 'procession' or 'human avalanche'. On 4 December 1913, for example, *La Prensa's* report of the week-long inauguration of Line A said: 'During the last two days the public's interest in getting to know the underground tramway did not cease. A large number of people, from every district of the Capital, were eager to visit the underground and to travel'.<sup>17</sup>

Enthusiasm demonstrated by the presence of the crowd was also evident during the opening of Line B (1930) and Line C (1934). 'Taking advantage of the inauguration of the new underground, a veritable procession (*romería*) passed through the *entrañas* [bowels] of the metropolis', said *La Razón* in October 1930.<sup>18</sup> The impressions of the journalists were illustrated by photographs of people queuing, posing and smiling, using the escalator or the turnstile, waiting on the platforms. Capturing the magnitude of the event, newspapers and brochures published the number of passenger-journeys. During the inauguration of Line A, for example, the company distributed tickets for free journeys. On the first day, the company registered 147,457 passenger-journeys, and 2,125,849 during the first month.<sup>19</sup> In the case of Line B, approximately 1.34 million passenger-journeys were recorded during the first few weeks (October 1930) and 190,000 on the first day alone.<sup>20</sup>

Those huge groups of people portrayed by the press did not form a homogeneous mass. The crowd was, in fact, constituted by a diversity of people of different ages, genders and social classes. The paper *La Razón* noted in 1930 that 'the novelty attracted everybody, regardless of social class': the opening day was an experience shared both by 'a luxuriously attired lady' and 'a dressmaker', while seated in the underground car could be the 'peaceful priest along with a worker - maybe with advanced ideas'.<sup>21</sup>

Looking at the photographs of the opening of Line B in 1930, published by one of the most important newspapers, one can identify the peculiarities of the crowd: a boy and five men going down the escalator; a gentleman with a stick, wearing a suit and a hat (he seems to be the boy's father); both probably belong to the upper middle class. Behind them stands a uniformed member of staff (a guard) and a young man whose clothes indicate he is a worker. Another picture shows a well dressed woman in front of the turnstile. Surrounding her are other passengers, of both sexes, and a guard. Another young lady waits on the other side of the turnstile, looking at the scene.<sup>22</sup>

These observations demonstrate that the popularity of the *Subte* was not only a matter of numbers but also of social diversity. The opening day was a more unrestricted event than the official ceremony in which only members of the elite could participate. Thereafter, diverse social groups mingled,

met and cohered through shared emotions. In general, the service was opened to the general public either the same day or the day after the official ceremony. The opening was characterised by the press as a solemn, formal affair and the public opening as 'spectacular'.<sup>23</sup> But, what made the public opening day very different from the official ceremony was that the former was not mediated by speeches but experienced through a 'shared emotion that it is beyond words'.<sup>24</sup>

The festive atmosphere was also encouraged by the fact that the opening days used to take place during the weekend: the event was organised for the crowd. In the case of the first underground line, the opening celebrations lasted a week and journeys were free. A journey on the underground, for example, could signal the end of a party as described by a newspaper in 1930: a 'large number of people leaving café-bars and night restaurants before 5 am eager to travel in the earliest underground train' because 'a trip on the new underground constituted the inevitable end of the party'.<sup>25</sup>

If curiosity for the novelty attracted large multitudes, such fascination was to make this crowd 'playful'. This became a problem for the 'normative' view of transport companies, politicians and the press. Playfulness was evident in the rhythm of circulation or the way in which the crowd moved through the underground; a rhythm which contrasted with the expected speed. From the normative viewpoint, the opening day was of course a celebration and the presence of crowds was something expected (and desired). But it was also an opportunity to instruct the public in the proper use of the underground railway, giving recommendations to protect passengers from accidents but whose fundamental aim was to reduce journey times. To accelerate the circulation of passengers within underground space was crucial to the smooth running of the system since the underground railway was planned to run within an established and strict timetable. The speed and high frequency of the underground journey depended on technology as well as humans. The former included the train, system of signals, electric power and so on, and the latter the staff and passengers. The time taken in getting on and off the underground car, for example, was of concern to the companies since it was one of the main causes of delay. According to an engineer on Line B, stops accounted for about forty per cent of the total journey time.<sup>26</sup>

The public guidelines produced by the Anglo-Argentine Tramway Company (AATC) are a good example of the double purpose of safety and saving time. Five days before the official inauguration of Line A (1 December 1913), the AATC used newspapers to circulate advice for passengers, indicating how to use the underground tramway. The first warned the public not to get onto the underground car when it was moving, as people used to do with the tram cars: the doors of underground cars closed at the moment the train started moving, and blocking closing doors delayed departure longer than the planned twenty seconds and caused headway between trains to increase. This was a clear safety warning to avoid accidents. Other 'tips' were aimed as much at training passengers to move faster in the underground as to prevent them blocking circulation. Those tips included for example: to leave

free space on platforms, move towards the doors when arriving at one's station, board cars quickly and distinguish the stations using the colour of their wall tiles, as the design scheme intended.<sup>27</sup>

Time-saving practices were an important concern since the stations of Buenos Aires' underground railways were built 400 metres apart. 'The length of stops is an important factor for the development of speed', said a newspaper before the inauguration of the first line, and added that the company hoped that the public would get used to boarding and leaving the coaches quickly 'as in the cities which have this modern service of transport'.<sup>28</sup>

However, like the 'jams' experienced during the opening of the New York *Subway*,<sup>29</sup> the main impression of moving within the *Subte* was one of immobility and discomfort: passengers moved slowly within the underground space; crowds packed the stations, making it impossible to take a train without waiting many minutes on account of delays and crowded cars.<sup>30</sup> The presence of the crowd was a sign of success but it also made the journey uncomfortable as an article about Line B's inauguration described: 'During the early hours of the morning it was very difficult to make one's way through the crowds of people at each station [...] Everyone wanted to anticipate [...] scenes of confusion took place [...] The new coaches were taken by storm. In one second they were packed out'.<sup>31</sup> Delays probably arose from the passengers' uncertainty about what to do; however, the reason seemed to be the presence of large numbers of people who were in turn enjoying an 'extraordinary' experience.

Organising the circulation of passengers was a prime concern of the municipal authorities, who expected the underground railway to offer a fast, safe and comfortable journey. During the inaugural week of Line A, Mayor Joaquin Anchorena personally visited the underground tramway to check how the service was operating. The Mayor mentioned several problems, including the need to organise better boarding and disembarking: he suggested that one door of the underground car must be designated for entry and the other for exit. He also proposed the same organisation for station entrance stairs. *La Prensa* explained that what the mayor observed were 'defects [...] caused by the current crowd of people.' 'However', said the newspaper, 'after the first days and once the public has satisfied its natural curiosity', it was 'necessary to normalize the things so that the underground railway reaches the goal to which it was built' - namely: 'to travel quickly, comfortably, and easily'.<sup>32</sup>

The normative view shows how the large number of people by itself constrained attempts to regulate passenger circulation. But the presence and behaviour of what they saw as a mob also made some journalists ambivalent about the underground railway. One juxtaposed technical progress with moral decline. An important Argentinean journalist, Constancio Vigil, highlighted the 'good manners' and 'polite behaviour' of the 100,000 people who travelled during the first twelve hours on the new line (Line A, 1913) and noted how the underground railway represented material



progress but also 'showed the culture of metropolitan people - not at all lower than the most civilised in the world'. The commentary was, in fact, sarcastic because for him the way in which the crowd boarded a coach was a sign of cultural backwardness. He likened a crowd driven by curiosity to a group of frenzied children who tried to 'go through a narrow space all together and at the same time'.<sup>33</sup>

Comparing the crowd with playful children was not the only way of criticising the behaviour of the public. A magazine article of 1913, 'The Travellers of the Underground Railway', described the underground as a tourist attraction, saying that 'the underground railway is today a train for tourists and perhaps it will always be'.<sup>34</sup> This was a sceptical view based on the fact that in the first two weeks after opening day the train was packed with people who travelled without needing to be on time. The article here differentiated the public from the commuter by comparing the former with a tourist: 'The tourist can wait. But businessmen hardly acquire the habit of calm after five minutes, which seem like three hours, in a station through which many trains passed completely packed'. Trains passing completely packed indicate that the public probably made more than one journey, travelling 'endlessly'. The underground journey was an end in itself, rather than as a means to save time. Anxiety was probably caused by excitement rather than motivated by punctuality. As a reporter commented in 1934, people were 'attracted by the novelty rather than the necessity of making a journey [in the sense of commuting]'.<sup>35</sup>

In short, from the perspective of companies and statesmen, the opening day was a festival of progress during which people became familiar with the underground railway but, most importantly, it was an event which legitimised a social and technological order. However, although the playful crowd was a sign of the popularity of the enterprise, it was also seen as a problem. Companies expected that once the public has satisfied its curiosity the service would run 'normally', which implied that the 'public' turned into 'passengers' who obey rules. In effect, the opening day experience was short-lived when compared with the daily journey, since it was an unusual episode of festivity with the character of an ephemeral ritual. Afterwards life returned to 'normal'. Curiosity was satisfied and the underground railway stopped being a novelty: 'hours later, the public was already used to the novelty and the underground railway was definitely incorporated into the means of transport of Buenos Aires'.<sup>36</sup>

### **Routine, disciplined commuting**

Although the *Subte* accounted for only about ten per cent of the total passenger-journeys on public transport, the number of passengers showed a steady increase from 1913.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the underground journey became an important daily experience. By the end of the 1930s, underground travel constituted 'one of the many pictures of the *porteña* life', according to *La Nación* newspaper.<sup>38</sup> 'An entire world moves and lives on



the underground railways', said the newspaper, confirming the prophecy that 'the underground world will be the real new one', as a popular magazine had envisaged in 1913.<sup>39</sup>

*La Nación* article was in fact a very brief text surrounded by several pictures of passengers using the *Subte*. Considering that *La Nación* was a broadsheet, it was the visual composition which had the stronger impact. Photography and drawing had become privileged forms for representing the flow of passengers. Portraying people using different modes of transport or walking was a common representation of the so-called 'human beehive'. The flow of passengers and traffic in general was a symbol of metropolitan vitality but, at the same time, this positive image co-existed with the daily experience of blocked streets, delays and accidents that turned the intense rhythm and scale of street traffic into a peril of urban life. Hence, although embodying fluidity, mass flows could simultaneously lead to 'strangulation' if not controlled, according to urban planners.

Unlike the picture of street traffic, the most typical images of the *Subte* were the voluminous but ordered flow of passengers entering or leaving a station, queuing at the ticket office, waiting at the platform, getting on or off the underground car. Inside the car, images of order and comfort show people reading a newspaper, looking out of the windows, looking at the floor or gazing into space, and keeping a distance from each other (Fig. 1).

Photographic representations of the daily underground journey triggered at least two contrasting views of progress. On the one hand, there was an idealisation of commuters that expressed an excited view of the rapid and



**Figure 1** Passengers travelling in comfort in the *Subte*, Line A, 1938. Source: *Archivo General de la Nación*.

mechanic flow of traffic as a sign of the vitality of the metropolis, on punctuality setting the rhythm of the everyday. From this perspective, the underground was a symbol of progress which embodied the space shaped in relation to (saving) time, reducing the daily journey between work and home. On the other hand, there was a cultural representation shaped by few but important writers that expressed dissatisfaction with that organisation of time and space in metropolitan life and criticised the idea of going underground in order to be on time.

The idealisation of the underground passenger was shaped by official voices and the press. According to Mayor Joaquín Anchorena, the underground railway will reach 'unknown velocities', 'abolishing distances' and saving time for 'the anxious multitude that moves in the business field'.<sup>40</sup> Rather than the businessman, what epitomised that anxious multitude was the employee (*empleado*).

As on inauguration day, one can identify in pictures of daily journeys a diversity of underground passengers in terms of gender, status and age. There was no economic restriction preventing the majority of people from using the *Subte* since the fare was affordable - 10 cents, as on the tramway. Moreover, the fare did not change over many decades, thus becoming cheaper than other public means of transport.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the radial and centralised underground network, 26 km long, did not cover industrial districts. It only connected residential areas with the commercial and administrative centre. The multitudes that travelled on the *Subte* belonged, then, mainly to middle classes. In the 1920s and 1930s the Buenos Aires middle classes were rather heterogeneous, comprised of workers, employees, professionals, storekeepers and traders, among others. But the connection with the city centre made the underground a means of transport for those who worked principally in public and tertiary sectors.

One characterisation of the underground commuter can be found in a May 1929 newspaper cartoon which depicted a crowded coach with seated men and women passengers reading newspapers and a standing 'strap-hanging' passenger explaining to another that he was using the train not because he had run out of petrol for the car, but because his car loan repayments were in arrears.<sup>42</sup> According to this representation the underground passenger was a person who, despite stable economic circumstances, could not afford a car. The underground was second-best even for middle class citizens whose other travel options were only marginally affordable.

But the figure of the employee was not merely a socio-economic characterisation. It was a symbol of the city's dynamism and, most important, it represented the vigorous multitudes that moved anxiously within the city performing punctuality. An article in a popular magazine in 1934 developed the idea well. Titled 'The Dynamism of the Porteño Employee', the article celebrated what it considered the hero of everyday life, the 'king of the city', the agent of progress of 'this Great South American Babel'.<sup>43</sup> The magazine identified the men and women who worked in shops, banks, offices and public service as 'the great phalanx (*falange*) of human bees'.<sup>44</sup>

The city's dynamism was illustrated in this article by pictures showing crowds entering or leaving stations, walking in the city centre or crossing the street, or the 'human bunch' hanging from buses and trams. One picture shows passengers getting into the underground car as a part of the quotidian scene. The article emphasised that the flow of passengers marked the rhythm of the city. Buenos Aires 'woke up' at 7 am when employees left their homes in the suburbs and when they 'invaded' the centre.<sup>45</sup>

That flow of passengers was a clear expression of the regulation of everyday urban life by work time; however, the organic metaphors that stressed the vitality and dynamism of the metropolis presented it as a natural movement. If organic metaphors such as blood circulation ('circulation', 'arteries') and rivers (*'afluente'* - tributary in Spanish) were used to represent traffic flow, underground mobility in particular triggered organic metaphors related to the digestive system: the 'fantastic steel and cement bowels of Buenos Aires, spewing out a compact crowd of busy human heads through their mouths'.<sup>46</sup> However, that frenzied flow of passengers was not a natural motion, and the article made this evident when it depicted how in the early morning at the stations the trains 'empty out their coaches full of anxious passengers'. The principal concern was not safety but punctuality: 'contingents of nervous employees look at either their watches or the big clocks in the stations [because] being on time [is] the supreme rule of the employee [...] If a coat of arms for the employee was made, it should say "always on time"'.<sup>47</sup>

This celebration of the flow of time-observant and time-tied individuals was typical but was not always positive. While satire directed at subterranean rail transport was common, there were few contemporary writers who tackled the underground railway in literature. They are significant not only due to their fame but also because they used the underground railway as a critique of progress. This new mobility was seen - cynically and pessimistically - as dehumanising: travel lost quality because of acceleration.

Criticism of mobility below ground could have been quite uniform, but Argentine writers wrote with nuance and different ideological influences. For instance, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada was a very important poet and social essayist of the cultural elite, influenced by Nietzsche and Simmel and a critical reader of Sarmiento, but Roberto Arlt was well-known as a novelist, dramatist, and journalist and was heavily influenced by Dostoyevsky. Martínez Estrada showed anti-urban sentiments, but Arlt's relation to technological progress was ambiguous. Fernández Moreno (1886–1950) was the so-called 'the poet of the city' since his poems portrayed different aspects of Buenos Aires in a simple style (*sencillismo*). Leaving aside the style and ideology of these writers, their discourses are analysed here as a symptom of modern anxieties - anxiety provoked by the 'tragedy of culture' in the sense that the 'objects' or environment (objective culture) created by humans (such as the city and its artefacts) seem to become autonomous, out of human control, overwhelming the individual (subjective culture).<sup>48</sup>

In his sketches (*Aguastrong Porteñas*) published daily in *El Mundo* newspaper (1928–30), Roberto Arlt depicted everyday urban life based on his

own experience as a *flâneur*. For him the *Subte* was ‘a scene of little events which is a very source of human psychology for that one who knows how to look at it [...] What occurs there is sometimes more eloquent than a novel’.<sup>49</sup> While he tackled the underground railway with irony in his sketches, in his novels it appears as the sign of a ‘dystopian Buenos Aires’.<sup>50</sup> As one of his characters remarks: ‘appalling super-civilization: tremendous cities [...] in whose subsoil triple networks of overlapping underground railways carry a pale crowd towards an endless progress of useless mechanisms’.<sup>51</sup>

In the sketch ‘What's Progress for?’ Arlt ridiculed the mechanisation of movements such as waking up, commuting, working, having lunch or sleeping, not only because they were ruled by work time, thus representing a constriction of urban life, but fundamentally because they were the typical everyday practises of those who aspired to socio-economic elevation. Arlt's criticism was clearly aimed at the aspirations of middle classes for whom the underground was a symbol of progress because it improved commuting and helped them to be on time:

We wake up in the morning, we get into the underground railway; we get out after travelling (in a closed space with electric lighting) [...] breathe two minutes the air of the streets and we go into an office to work with electric light. We go out and it is night, we go into the underground again and travel with electric light and then into an apartment to breathe a cube-shaped air calculated by an architect. We get worse but one hundred thousand idiots call this progress!<sup>52</sup>

Arlt resisted and contested the rhythm of urban life set by punctuality. This attitude was eloquently depicted in ‘Night Job’, a sketch which recounted the kind of work that Arlt's friend Spaventa had. He worked from 9 pm to 2 am - ‘at the time in which everybody goes to the bar (*feca*) or sleeps (*apoliya*)’.<sup>53</sup> Sleeping during the morning, Spaventa went to work when nobody works ‘which is like not working’, said Arlt. In doing so, Spaventa avoided the routine of ‘waking up at 7 am like everyone, washing my face in [a] high-handed way’ and most importantly, he avoided ‘getting into the underground tramway full of blokes having bags under their eyes’.<sup>54</sup>

Arlt used a common trope in Argentinian literature and culture, namely, laziness (*fiaca*). The figure of the lazybones was diametrically opposed to the employee and Arlt ennobled it giving his friend the status of a prophet. Like Nietzsche, ‘I could say: Thus spoke Spaventa’, Arlt wrote.

A more pessimistic view of the underground as a symbol of progress was expressed by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada in *Goliath's Head: Microscopic Study of Buenos Aires* (1940). These essays, written during the 1930s when the underground network was being completed, have been one of the most influential texts about modern Buenos Aires. Martínez Estrada tried to demystify the flow of traffic as a mark of the modern Buenos Aires. Instead he observed it with cynicism, pointing out that speed was not a sign of

progress *per se*. While Arlt reacted against underground travel because it expressed the linear rhythm of modern life, Martínez Estrada criticised it as an expression of a velocity ‘without any purpose’.

The city had become for him a ‘racetrack’ and because the surface space was not enough to contain its absurd velocity, it needed to go underground. As a result, the underground space became an ‘exhaust valve for the excess of the yearning of velocity’, channelling ‘the surplus of energy’ of the metropolis. Thus, the underground railway becomes part of the circulatory and nervous systems of the city, like sewers, gas and water piping, telephone cable and pneumatic tubes.

This spatial transformation was the symptom of a culture of speed which characterised the American continent, one that was ‘a continent of movement and velocity’ in Estrada's opinion. But, unlike the urban circulation of European cities which was an expression of the dynamic movement of progress, Buenos Aires' speed was a ‘tachycardia, not an activity,’ a ‘pure bustle without any purpose’ because people moved because of an intrinsic but motive-less need to move. This observation attacked Buenos Aires' pride by marking the difference between physical movement as an expression of progress (as in Europe) and the senseless acceleration of a city which had lost its destiny. In contrast to the image of traffic flow as an expression of the ‘human beehive’, for Martínez Estrada, Buenos Aires ‘loves velocity, but it does not mean that she is active’. Moreover, this observation was related to his criticism of the size of the metropolis. Buenos Aires had become huge and wealthy as well as ephemeral and fragile.<sup>55</sup> The macrocephaly was the consequence of the suction of the interior resources (goods and people) and the consumption of external commodities, but acceleration was an expression of trade flow. His pessimistic view was that both the size and speed of the metropolis were signs of Barbarism rather than Civilisation.<sup>56</sup>

In Martínez Estrada one can see the typical criticism of the outcome of the nineteenth-century liberal project of modernisation, a conservative view that recovered the virtues of the countryside and the *gaucho* (previously signs of Barbarism), contrasting the *Pampas* with the metropolis. The author emphasised that contrast by deploying the figures of the car driver and the underground motorman. For him, the car was a sign of freedom, and speed was a pleasure. Conversely, speed ruled by the underground railway clock signified alienation. Driving a car, unlike driving an underground train, was a meaningful practice with historical roots. Martínez Estrada redeems the man of the *Pampas* saying that the car driver had the reflexes of a *gaucho*. In each swerve the driver reflected the skills of the rider. However, the activity of the railway motorman was monotonous; he ‘shoots out like an arrow in the sky’ because ‘the perils of the road were removed’. In the motorman's veins, Martínez Estrada wrote, ‘a circulatory impulse’ was conducted because it is the ‘material blood of the metropolis’.<sup>57</sup>

If driving reflected freedom and pleasure, underground travel was the expression of a mechanical movement without individual will. Martínez Estrada

called this ‘translation’ (*traslación*).<sup>58</sup> The experience of travelling had been reduced by the underground railway to:

a mechanical scheme of going from home to work [...] time is saved which is a way of gaining some minutes for a break; the temptation of freedom is not experienced; it does not torture with typical mishaps of street traffic; it is known in advance where the train will stop and the precise moment of arrival; one travels without any kind of interruption; [...] the underground travel comes to be an involuntary act more similar to feeding and industrial work than moving thinking about what one is doing.<sup>59</sup>

For both Martínez Estrada and Arlt the underground journey symbolised the mechanisation of spatial practices turning the passenger into an automaton. If avoiding street obstacles was an advantage of the underground, the lack of interruption made the underground journey pure motion without quality, mechanical movement without human will. Therefore, passengers played a passive role since they were transported by the underground railway without ‘thinking’; the only moment in which the passenger had to think was ‘when he has to get off the car’.

This lack of quality was also perceived by Fernández Moreno in his poem ‘Underground Railways’ (c. 1930). He maintained in similar terms the idea that the underground journey was far from being ‘proper travel’. In the underground, he said, ‘it is difficult to read or think. To meditate requires less vertigo’.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

Underground travel in Buenos Aires between 1913 and 1944 was a meaningful experience in the sense that it triggered ambiguous representations of technology-based progress and the meaning of modern life. On the one hand, the atmosphere of joy during the opening days reinforced the dominant ideology that boosted speed, comfort and safety as symbols of progress. Yet the new technological order was also undermined by massive participation, and the fascination of the crowd caused congestion and delays. If the underground implied greater velocity, real movement within the new underground space was characterised by its slowness. The playful crowd on the *Subte* thus contrasted with the disciplined passenger. The perception of a crowd indifferent to time and rules might explain why, in the context of the opening day, the early travellers were not called passengers but ‘the public’, which suggests they were like spectators. Nonetheless, normative mobility was reinforced by some discourses of the daily travel experience through the figure of the office worker, the passenger eager to be on time. On the other hand, the normative mobility embodied by the underground journey was seen by some writers as a dehumanising experience that transformed the underground passenger into an automaton.

The critique of the playful crowd as well as the representation of the passenger as an automaton was ideological because from the late nineteenth century Argentinean intellectuals had felt sceptical about material progress and



its separation from moral progress, as embodied by the city, its artefacts and crowd. But that scepticism and critique should be also understood as symptomatic of anxieties caused by new experiences in modern cities, as 'the city became more materialistic, it engendered a hostility in literary imagination'.<sup>61</sup>

Transitoriness and instability are characteristics of modern and large cities, but they do not necessarily imply that travel and the spaces of movement are devoid of meaning. On the contrary, as Ole Jensen states, mobility practices must be understood as meaningful practices of everyday life.<sup>62</sup> Or, in Urry's terms, 'movement often involves an embodied experience of the material and sociable modes of dwelling-in-motion'.<sup>63</sup> As an editor noticed in 1913, underground travel will imply 'a change of habits, ways of thinking, even ways of feeling, in the people carried by those trains; it (the underground journey) finally impacts on the city's life in general; the things change men and the action of environment transforms social conditions'.<sup>64</sup>

Further examination of practices and behaviour in the *Subte* will probably bring new insights into underground travel as a meaningful practice, even as a space of sociability and not pure alienation.

That underground commuting in Buenos Aires remains a significant practice in people's memories is evident in recent reactions towards the replacement of the original cars of the Line A - the oldest underground cars in service in the world. The hundred-year-old tram cars, originally built in Belgium by *La Brugeoise*, were removed in January 2013 due to their age and for safety reasons. Beyond the discussion between politicians and experts about safety and modernisation, there was an 'extraordinary' social event organised by workers and passengers to say goodbye to the old cars. The farewell was a mixture of festivity and nostalgia that included a 'last' journey, a small concert and poetry readings. Many people posed for a photograph inside or beside a car. Naturally, the car is part of the city's memorabilia but the question is to what extent people were saying goodbye to an 'artefact' that just transports them or to a 'place' where they have spent significant time, and have a stock of 'stories'. During and after the decommissioning of the cars, many people recalled the smell, light, rocking and noise of those wooden cars. Besides those most 'visible' and tactile aspects of the car there are other stories, feelings and bodily practises, shaped by or stemmed from those cars that will remain as indelible memories.

## Notes

- 1 Buenos Aires' population grew six-fold between 1887 and 1936 (from 400,000 to 2.4 million) as a consequence of a massive immigration from Europe (1869–1930) and then domestic immigration from the countryside.
- 2 Buenos Aires finished the main network in 1944. Mexico (1969), Sao Paulo (1972) and Santiago de Chile (1975) implemented the system decades later.
- 3 J. Barret, 'Buenos Ayres: The Paris of America', *The New York Times*, 19 August 1909, np.
- 4 Cosmopolitanism was strongly influenced by European immigration but also by elite's culture.
- 5 'Inauguración del Tranvía Subterráneo', *La Prensa (Buenos Aires)*, 2 December 1913, np.
- 6 Trade relations were established mainly but not exclusively with the British Empire. Argentina was the first country in Latin America to receive British investment, mainly in government bonds and railways. Line A (1913) was built and operated by the Anglo-Argentine Tramways



- Company which controlled eighty per cent of the tramway network of Buenos Aires. Line B (1930) was built and operated by a national company (Lacroze Hnos.) with American investors; Lines C (1934), D (1937), and E (1944) were built and operated by the Spanish company CHADOPYF.
- 7 SCA, 'Las Grandes Obras (El Subterráneo)', *Revista de la Sociedad Central de Arquitectos* 112 (1917): 78.
  - 8 J. Stock, 'Los Subterráneos en Buenos Aires', *La Ingeniería* 664–8 (1930): 3.
  - 9 J. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870–1910* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1974); R. García Heras, *Transportes, Negocios y Política: La Compañía Anglo Argentina de Tranvías, 1876–1981* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 1994); Nora Clichevsky, 'Condiciones de Vida y Transporte. El Caso del Subterráneo de Buenos Aires. 1900–45', *Eure*, 15:42 (1988), pp. 97–110.
  - 10 V. Gruschetsky, 'Argentina in Motion: Connections between Mobility, Politics, and Culture in Recent Historiography', *T2M Yearbook*, 4 (2013), pp. 138–41.
  - 11 B. Bobrick, *Labyrinths of Iron: A History of the World's Subways* (New York, Henry Holt, 1994); D. Pike, *Subterranean Cities: The World beneath Paris and London, 1800–1945* (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 2005); M. Brooks, *Subway City: Riding the Trains, Reading New York* (New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1997).
  - 12 J. V. Tomey, 'En el Subterráneo', *P.B.T. (Buenos Aires)*, 13 December 1913, np.
  - 13 D. Welsh, *Underground Writing: The London Tube from George Gissing to Virginia Woolf* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2010).
  - 14 *Caras y Caretas* (1898–1941) about 100,000 per year, *P.B.T.* (1904–18) 45,000.
  - 15 B. Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, (London, Verso, 2006), 14.
  - 16 'Nuevos Elementos para el Subterráneo', *La Nación (Buenos Aires)*, 14 November 1911, np.
  - 17 'El Tranvía Subterráneo', *La Prensa (Buenos Aires)*, 4 December 1913, np.
  - 18 'Aprovechando la Inauguración del Nuevos Subterráneo, una verdadera Romería pasó por las Entrañas de la Metrópoli', *La Razón (Buenos Aires)*, 18 October 1930, p. 6. See also 'Fue enorme la Multitud que viajó en el Subterráneo habilitado hoy', *La Razón (Buenos Aires)*, 11 November 1934, p. 6.
  - 19 Anglo-Argentine Tramway Company, *Subterráneo de Buenos Aires - Inauguración al Servicio Público de la Línea Plaza de Mayo - Plaza Once de Septiembre* (Buenos Aires, AATC, 1927), np; Subterráneos de Buenos Aires S.E. (SBASE), *Compendio Estadístico del Subte de Buenos Aires*, (Buenos Aires, SBASE, 2004), p. 13.
  - 20 'Con Gran Afluencia del Público fueron ayer iniciados los Servicios del Nuevo Subterráneo', *La Nación*, 19 October 1930, p. 13.
  - 21 'Aprovechando la Inauguración', *La Razón*, p. 6.
  - 22 'Con Gran Afluencia', *La Nación*, p. 13.
  - 23 'Inaugurations of Buenos Aires Subway', *Bulletin of Pan-American Union*, 38:1 (1914), p. 2.
  - 24 D Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 1994), p. 14.
  - 25 'Con Gran Afluencia', *La Nación*, p. 13.
  - 26 C. Echegaray, 'Subterráneo Lacroze - Proyecto y Construcción', *La Ingeniería* (1930), p. 354.
  - 27 'Los Grandes Progresos de la Capital Federal', *La Prensa*, 26 November 1913, p. 13.
  - 28 'El Subterráneo - Su Inauguración - El Acto de Hoy', *La Nación*, 01 December 1913, np.
  - 29 Brooks, *Subway City*, p. 68.
  - 30 Scenes of 'crowding and confusion' were also described in the opening of the New York Subway. Bobrick, *Labyrinths of Iron*, p. 259.
  - 31 'Aprovechando la Inauguración', *La Razón*, p. 6.
  - 32 'El Tranvía Subterráneo', *La Prensa*, np.
  - 33 C. Vigil, 'La Semana', *Mundo Argentino (Buenos Aires)*, 3: 165 (1913), np.
  - 34 El Hidalgo de Tor, 'Los Viajeros del Subterráneo', *La Ilustración Sudamericana (Buenos Aires)*, 5 December 1913, p. 439.
  - 35 'Fue enorme la Multitud', *La Razón*, p. 5.
  - 36 'Con Gran Afluencia del Público', *La Nación*, p. 13.
  - 37 The first line (Line A) registered a growth from 31.7 million to 68.4 million passengers between 1918 and 1930. In 1937 the four existing lines registered 120 million, reaching 321 million with five lines in 1945. 'Tráfico Subterráneo en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires', *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, 42:4 (1930), pp. 56–64.

- 38 'El Mundo de los Subterráneos', *La Nación*, 30 May 1937, np. *Porteño* in Spanish means "people from the port" and that is how Buenos Aires' inhabitants are known.
- 39 Tomey, 'En el Subterráneo', np.
- 40 'Inauguración', *La Prensa*, np.
- 41 A skilled-worker earned in average 83 cents per hour. That means that the fare represented the 12.5 per cent.
- 42 *La Razón*, 6 May 1929, np.
- 43 C. A. Rando, 'El Dinamismo del Empleado Porteño', *Aconcagua (Buenos Aires)*, 16:59 (1934), p. 54.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 D. Frisby, *Simmel and Since: Essays on Georg Simmel's Social Theory* (London, Routledge, 1992).
- 49 R. Arlt, *Aguafuertes porteñas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1976), p. 96.
- 50 M. Riera, 'Dystopian Buenos Aires', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 28: 2 (2009), pp.246–65.
- 51 R. Arlt, *Los Lanzallamas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1977), p. 33.
- 52 R. Arlt, *Obra Completa* (Buenos Aires, C. Lohlé, 1981), pp. 193-4.
- 53 In his column he uses many terms from *lunfardo* (slang).
- 54 Arlt, *Aguafuertes porteñas*, p. 116.
- 55 E. Martínez Estrada, *La Cabeza de Goliat. Microscopía de Buenos Aires* (Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1970), pp. 26-7.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 58 The original term in Spanish is *traslación* from the Latin *translatio* (carry and bring across).
- 59 Martínez Estrada, *La Cabeza*, pp. 30-1.
- 60 B. Fernández Moreno, *Guía Caprichosa de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires, EUDEBA, 1965), p. 63.
- 61 R. Lehan, *The City in Literature. An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998), p. 5.
- 62 O. Jensen, 'Flows of Meaning, Cultures of Movements - Urban Mobility as Meaningful Everyday Life Practice', *Mobilities*, 4:1 (2009), p. 140.
- 63 J. Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007), p. 11.
- 64 'Editorial', *La Nación*, 1 December 1913, np.

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