Explaining How Uruguay Became a “Religious Ghetto”*

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Abstract

Given Latin America’s historical and robust religiosity, how do sociologists explain that Uruguay became an extremely secular society since the turn of the twentieth century? Earliest attempts to interpret and explain Uruguayan secular society came in the 1960s from Uruguayan scholars. Typically, these studies were produced by religious practitioners, or at least researchers sympathetic to religion, who attributed weak religiosity, at least weak Catholicism, to two factors: the lack of a colonial heritage and European immigration. Counterfactuals to the “weak institution” and the “social base” claims are based on new research, especially as it pertains to immigration and settlement patterns among Italian and Spanish immigrants. The counter-arguments presented here, while not entirely invalidating the “social base” and “weak institutional church” claims, make it more difficult to assume that urban demographics and ecclesiastical history in Uruguay are significantly correlated to the secularization of Uruguayan society. This study is important because it creates theoretical space that should stimulate researchers to consider alternative causes for Uruguayan secular society that provide greater explanatory power by integrating historically contingent evidence in the context of theoretical explanation.

Keywords

Colonization, immigration, social composition, mutual aid societies, Uruguay

Uruguayan society is an outlier when considering religious intensity among Latin American societies while presenting a paradox to sociologists of religion. Embedded in a continent characterized by relatively high religiosity and religious adherence historically, how is it that Uruguay became an extremely secular society since the turn of the twentieth century (Caetano and Geymonat 1997; Ardao 1962; Zubillaga and Cayota 1988)? Religious pluralism on the continent has been the focus of extensive post-war scholarship in which religious change has been analyzed for its social, political, and economic significance. In spite of a religiously charged environment represented by the growth of Pentecostalism in the last 30 years, how is it that a Catholic-majority society was transformed to a

“religious ghetto” (Rodé 1963; De Santa Ana 1965; Caetano and Geymonat 1997; Da Costa 2003)? The earliest attempts to interpret and explain Uruguayan secular society came in the 1960s. Typically these studies were produced by religious practitioners, or at least researchers sympathetic to religion, who attributed weak religiosity, at least weak Catholicism, to two factors: the lack of a colonial heritage and European immigration (Fitzgibbon 1954; Villegas 1978; De Santa Ana 1965; Rodé 1963; Bazzano et al.

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1993). This paper aims to explore the validity of these explanations and, while willing to reinforce valid contingencies in the arguments, the author emphasizes counterfactuals that weaken the claims. This is an important step in clarifying the causes of a secular society because, as plausible as these arguments appear, a narrative relating conjunctive events to one another is necessary but provides an insufficient explanation. Research on secularization has progressed significantly since the 1960s providing greater theoretical leverage to make sense of historical contingencies. Social explanations must account for both approaches of causality. Therefore, this essay seeks to create theoretical space by questioning the substantive efficacy of these present claims by explaining their inadequacy.

WEAK INSTITUTIONAL ARGUMENT

Spanish colonization in *la Banda Oriental* did not begin in earnest until the eighteenth century and the first diocese was not established in Montevideo until 1878. In short, the standard narrative suggests that the absence of a colonial history resulted in weak ecclesiastical institutions and a scarcity of priests. A weak infrastructure contributed to a fragmented network of churches that were dependent on a hierarchy based in Buenos Aires (Villegas 1978: 10). An undeveloped national clergy and infrastructure was unprepared to respond to positivistic rationalism that produced anticlerical elites who came to dominate politics such that Uruguay essentially became a laicized state (Bazzano et al. 1993; Ardao 1962). The correlation between the “weak Catholic institutional” narrative and secularization in Uruguay appears plausible when Uruguay is considered in isolation to other Latin American republics. However, when considered in comparative perspective, for example, to the historical development of the church in Costa Rica, the explanation is less forceful. Both regions missed out on most of the colonial era because there was

nothing to exploit: no mines, no precious metals, and no labor (Perez-Brignoli 1989: 91; Picado 1994: 136; Villegas 1994: 84). There were few indigenous people in either area¹. What little evangelization was conducted by the Jesuits and Franciscans who established few *reducciones*². Due to limited population and commercial interest, the colonial church, when it did become organized, functioned as a mission on the frontier of a more established archdiocese: Montevideo was dependent on the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires and the Costa Rican church was dependent on the Archdiocese of Leon Nicaragua. Hence, the churches in both Montevideo and Cartago (the colonial capital of Costa Rica) were decentralized, dependent, and institutionally weak. The clergy were poor and isolated. Because it was dependent on the Archdiocese of Leon in Nicaragua, in order to survive, the Costa Rican clergy had to serve as judges and serve the state for income. Geography made travel difficult, especially during the rainy season; therefore, there were no regular meetings between the leadership in Nicaragua and the priests in the Costa Rican frontier (Picado 1988: 50). Neither colonial church had a bishop, nor cathedral, or a seminary with which to build an institutionalized ecclesiastical structure.

Montevideo became a vicariate in 1832 and later a diocese in 1878 thus receiving its first bishop, Jacinto Vera. In spite of its late formation by 1838, the vicariate consisted of 33 parishes, 51 churches and chapels, and was supported by 100 clerics (both regular and secular) serving a population of 114,000 (Bazzano et al. 1993: 34). This corresponds to a parish for every 3,454 Uruguayan and a priest for every 1,140. The municipal census of Montevideo in 1889 reveals that 83% of the respondents are self-identified Catholics out of a population of 180,000³. In spite of the absence of an extended colonial history, Catholicism, both real and nominal, did become embedded in Uruguayan culture. Costa Rica followed a similar pattern of ecclesiastical development. Costa

Rica did not achieve an independent bishopric until 1851. Candidates for the priesthood still had to travel to León for training and Costa Rica did not have a seminary until 1878 (Mecham 1966: 332). The average number of regular and secular clergy until 1850 (when it became an independent archdiocese) was 50 (Arias 1988: 10; Sanabria 1984). This means that the priests-to-parishioner ratio at the time of independence was approximately 1,260 (Woodward 1991: 8). According to Picado (1988: 137), thru the colonial era, *reducciones* were slowly transformed into parishes which totaled 23 by the time of independence. If Woodward (1991: 8) was correct in estimating the general population of Costa Rica to be 63,000 in 1820, this resulted in parish for every 2,739 residents.

Two conditions existed, characterizing both Uruguay and Costa Rica, which impacted ecclesiastical development. Whereas in other Latin American countries, the state expropriated church properties in order to enrich the state at the expense of the church, this was not the case in Costa Rica or Uruguay. We can reject the notion that the wealth of the church impeded capitalistic development by monopolizing land holdings that were in turn left uncultivated or outside of commercial use (Picado 1988: 57). More importantly, however, is the absence of an alliance between the church and a conservative oligarchy. There was no conservative oligarchy in Costa Rica with whom the church could have formed an alliance. There were no *latifundios* because there were so few indigenous people and colonists did not import slaves. In Costa Rica, the agrarian-economic model was the *campesino* nuclear family owning its own piece of land. It was a rural democracy in which the principal elite agents in the post-independence era were the merchant class (Yashar 1997; Williams 1989). Hence, Costa Rica did not experience the typical conservative-liberal cleavages and civil wars. The church did not have an alliance partner with the conservative oligarchy

because one did not exist. In Uruguay, there were *latifundios* and there was a conservative oligarchy that resisted liberal impulses. However, in Uruguay, the rural oligarchy was not a monolithic block. There were two clearly differentiated groups of oligarchical elites—whose interests were divided—which had profound implications for the state development in Uruguay. The first group consisted of *criollo* caudillos and their gaucho followers. These were the core of the *blanco* party and their conflict with the urban doctors led to cycles of rural rebellions by party militias (Rock 2000: 181; López-Alves 1996; Finch 1981). The second group consisted of the modernizing land owners of the littoral and the south, closer to Montevideo, most of whom were British Protestants. The modernizers had a rural business linkage to the bankers in Montevideo. Modernization led to the enclosure and to displacement of rural workers who became the rural and urban poor. As a result of disparate economic interests among the two groups, there was little linkage between the Montevideo and the hinterland, hence, the state in Uruguay remained undeveloped and weak (Finch 1981: 32; Rock 2000: 181; López-Alves 1996). As a result of this division, there was no alliance between the church and a rural oligarchy in Uruguay and hence, no real threat to the liberals.

Both the Costa Rican and Uruguayan churches were institutionally, politically, and economically weak, and not a threat to the liberal-republican vision of the state. Hence, this background does not explain why the liberal reformers attacked the church in either nation because: (1) there was no powerful church that was an obstacle to reform; and (2) there was no conservative ally of the church threatening the liberals. In spite of the commonality between the ecclesiastical development in Uruguay and Costa Rica, the role of the church in the formation of the modern state and entry into modernity was entirely different in each society. The Costa Rican church, as institutionally weak as it was, was able to resist secularizing

impulses pressed by personalistic dictators, entered into a *modus vivendi* with secular elites, and the church has been a stable actor in Costa Rican society; Uruguay became intensely secular and hostile to religion (Caetano 2000; 2013).

SOCIAL BASE ARGUMENT

The social base argument contends that secularization in Uruguay can be attributed, in part, to massive and spontaneous European immigration (De Santa Ana 1965: 94-96; Rodé 1963: 6; Bazanno et al. 1993; Rossi 1989; Rodríguez and Sapriza 1983). The standard narrative reads like this: European immigrants were not characterized by nostalgia for the homeland because they were pushed out by civil wars and political conflict thus motivated by the possibility of a better future. Concentrated in the working class, immigrants to Uruguay became the social base for the nascent worker-anarchists movement corresponding to the emergence of industrialization in Montevideo. These immigrants, coming from Catholic countries, arrived to Uruguay with anticlerical sentiments because the church symbolized the oppression and misery that they sought to abandon (Fitzgibbon 1954). Hence, Italian and Spanish immigrants dominated the social base whose anticlerical dispositions penetrated all aspects of the national life. One effect that immigration is believed to have had is the displacement of the *criollo* heritage and ethos since immigrants and their children had no experience or memory of historical struggles essential to national formation and narrative (Bazanno et al. 1993: 62-63). Hence, immigration is attributed to transforming Uruguay into a cosmopolitan society that had little national recollection of the church's role in shaping the national conscience. While this explanation is plausible and appears to be the default narrative concerning immigration to the Rio Plata region, investigations over the last two decades have revisited immigration data and raised doubts concerning certain

aspects of this narrative; these include the methodology employed to quantify the immigrant population (linear or circular), the composition of the immigrants, and assumptions regarding settlement patterns (homogeneity/heterogeneity, assimilation/pluralistic model).

Quantitatively, researchers who have closely studied the phenomenon of Uruguayan immigration and demographics in the period of interest (1870-1930), elaborate extensively on the lack of reliable data (Rial 1980; 1981; Rodríguez and Sapriza 1983: 18; Oddone 1966a; 1966b: 12; Pereira and Trajtenberg 1966; Goebel 2010)⁴. Limited data produced exaggerations among earlier analysis (see Valliant 1873; Bordoni 1885 cited in Rodríguez and Sapriza 1983) leading to more rigorous studies in the 1960s that attempted to reconstruct a plausible history of both immigration and emigration using the most dependable data available (Oddone 1966a; Pereira and Trajtenberg 1966)⁵. The problem with the census data is that it is cross-sectional and does not reflect the temporary nature that characterized immigration. The larger question that researchers must address is: is immigration linear or is it circular when considering trans-national immigration in this era? Did European immigrants arrive to Uruguay and remain permanently? Some did but many did not. Devoto (2003: 35) suggested that the data empirically support a circular pattern of immigration. Between 1861 and 1920, almost 50% of all of Italians and 35% of Spaniards returned home. Many of the Italians were *golondrinas*, seasonal agriculture workers who spent half of the year in Europe and the other half in South America (Piore 1980). Immigrants tended to work in secondary labor-markets characterized by labor-intense and low wages; hence, the promise of a better life in Uruguay was not always realized prompting immigrants to return home or to move on to Buenos Aires (Oddone 1966a: 12, 17; Rodríguez and Sapriza 1983: 88-89). Apart from the xenophobic era associated with the Rojas regime in which immigration in Uruguay

outpaced Argentina, Montevideo was in fact considered backwaters to Buenos Aires. By the mid-nineteenth century, Argentina had more favorable macro-economic and political development and greater availability of land (Goebel 2010: 202; Oddone 1966a). Gobel (2010: 203) pointed out that rather than a final destination, Uruguay was primarily a country of transit within a broader migratory circuit (Finch 1981: 25; Hanson 1979: 9). Using the Registry of Legal Citizens, Zubillaga (1993: 83) identified that between 1874 and 1901, only 1,596 foreigners became Uruguayan citizens. Naturalization may have been uncommon because of the ease of assimilation with few advantages derived from becoming a Uruguayan citizen. On the other hand, it may have been that immigrants were hesitant to symbolically break with their homeland because they knew that they would be returning there one day. Hence, census data, even if it calculates the immigrant population in 1852, 1860, and 1908, do not capture the transitory nature of the shifting population. A better source of data would be one that not only quantifies the inflow of Europeans to Uruguay, but captures the true extent of both emigration and on-going migration to Argentina. An attempt to calculate this migratory dynamic was realized by Pereira and Trajtenberg (1966) who then compared their findings to those in multiple volumes of the *Anuario Estadístico*. The practice of the *Anuario Estadístico* to register passengers arriving at all of Uruguay's ports did not begin until 1893 (Rodríguez and Sapriza 1983: 15). They noted lapses (1907-1913; 1922-1930) in which the criteria for classifying incoming passengers vary considerably and many primary records prior to 1920 were simply unintelligible due to poor conservation. They found numerous errors regarding the total movement of immigrants. For example, immigrants who exited by boat across the Uruguayan River to Argentina were not recorded. The same *Anuarios* showed, for example, that between 1912 and 1944, 90,000 more Uruguayan citizens entered the country than exited yet there is no

corroborating record of a net emigration of Uruguayan citizens in that timeframe—the return into the country was recorded in the *Anuarios* but not the departure (Rodríguez and Sapriza 1983: 16).

Because of unreliable entry statistics, estimates of the total net inflow of European immigrants from 1880 to 1915 vary wildly. Sánchez-Albornoz (1986: 130) cited a figure of 361,300, which is too high given the balance of movement between immigration and emigration. Data from the *Anuario Estadísticos* suggest that European immigration at the port of Montevideo, the only relevant point of entry for Europeans, was estimated at 270,009 which is unreliable because it under-records exits to Argentina (Rodríguez and Sapriza 1983). Rodríguez and Sapriza (1983: 28) offered a more conservative estimate of 153,987 European (net) immigrants between 1880 and 1915, which if this estimate was correct, would result in an average of 4,400 European immigrants annually. In comparison to natural population growth, immigration growth was low⁶. Rothman (1969), in a paper submitted to the International Population Conference, London, presented the following demographic chart comparing quinquennial population rates based on natality, mortality, and immigration data for Argentina and Uruguay.

Table 1 shows that the average natural increase (difference between births and deaths) between 1895 and 1919 in Uruguay was 24.6 per thousand whereas the net contribution of immigration to the total population growth for the same period was .9 per thousand⁷. Rothman (1969: 714) commented that “In the case of Uruguay, the importance of immigration—which in relative figures *might have been significant* in the second part of the 19th century—seems to have diminished in the 20th century”. The bottom line is that the assumption that immigration has significantly influenced the social base of Uruguay, especially in Montevideo, depends, in part, on the magnitude of immigration; which has been shown to be inflated and exaggerated.

Table 1. Argentina and Uruguay: Estimated Population and Demographic Rates Crude Rates per 1,000 Population

Country and period	Population in thousands	Births	Deaths	Natural increase	Migration	Total increase
Argentina						
1895-1899	4,426	46.1	21.8	24.3	12.3	36.6
1900-1904	5,296	44.3	20.0	24.3	9.3	33.6
1905-1909	6,337	42.4	17.7	24.7	24.4	49.1
1910-1914	7,583	40.3	15.6	24.7	17.4	42.1
1915-1919	8,652	36.2	16.0	20.2	-1.8	18.4
Uruguay						
1895-1899	826.3	43.4	14.8	28.6	.1	28.7
1900-1904	934.8	38.9	13.7	25.2	.9	26.1
1905-1909	1,054	37.6	14.0	23.6	2.2	25.8
1910-1914	1,189	36.5	13.5	23.0	1.3	24.3
1915-1919	1,318	31.9	14.1	17.8	.2	18.0

Note: Source: (Rothman 1969: 716).

SOCIAL COMPOSITION

The second assumption regarding Uruguayan immigration has to do with the composition of the immigrant communities. The assumption suggests that many of the immigrants were of proletariat origins, experienced limited opportunities for social mobility due to the oppressive nature of capitalist expansion in particular areas of Italy and Spain, hence, fled their homeland to look for better opportunities in Latin America. They brought with them either an affiliation with or a disposition towards worker-anarchists movements which emerged in Montevideo in conjunction with the modernization of the economy. The immigrant work force was inherently anticlerical and hostile towards Catholicism because the church represented the way of life they abandoned in their land of origin. A significant factor in this narrative is the motivation for immigrating in the first place. Oddone (1966a; 1966b) attempted to frame immigration as a consequence of social change associated with agrarian capitalism and the industrial revolution, particularly when it emerged in Italy and

Spain. Principle changes included urbanization, industrialization (at least in northern Italy), and proletarianization of the labor force, which, gave rise to class consciousness, class conflict, and eventually “societies of resistance” which revolted against the status quo of which the church was a collaborator. However, Devoto (2003: 31-32) cautioned against an overly simplistic explanation. It is not at all clear if immigrants were motivated by capitalistic expansion at home that increased rural pauperism and labor disputes in the urban areas—all of which contributed to a push factor—or was migration influenced by a pull factor? Destinations like Uruguay and Buenos Aires were attracting potential immigrants with promises of social mobility. There is empirical evidence to support both factors. Devoto pointed out that push factors were fragmented, geographically determined, and not uniform. Capitalistic development was uneven and social ills created by expanding capitalism and industrialization were also uneven. Second, the greater amount of empirical evidence seems to support the pull factor that emigration from Italy occurred because of expanding opportunities in

foreign destinations. Rodríguez and Sapriza (1983: 89-91) referred to the offices of the *Dirección General de Inmigración* which were created for the very purpose to persuade European immigrants to stay in Uruguay⁸. However, the notion that immigration should be analyzed on the national (macro) level is susceptible to producing distortions because analysis rests on the assumption that economic markets and public policy are more important than individual motivations to migrate. This involves an overvaluation of the state's role in the juridical, administrative, and economic spheres which homogenizes immigrants and assumes that impersonal market forces are determining factors. We know from recent migration studies that primary social networks are a far greater motivation for migration than economic factors (Massey 2002; 2003; 1987; 1998).

Networks based on occupational skills or village linkage appear to be a better indicator of migration than the assumption of a "migratory chain" (Devoto 2003: 40; Baily 1999: 13). This may have been especially true for the Spanish immigrants for whom emigration to the Spanish-American colonies had been a long tradition. Moya (1998: 68-72) studied migratory patterns of Spaniards to Rio Plate and found that kinship networks more than emigration agents or labor contractors were the principal motivation for emigrating. Resembling more of a web than a chain, networks transcended immediate family to include village *paisano* relations. Although migration to the Rio Plate region was disrupted by events such as Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian Peninsula (1807-1814), the War of Independence (1810-1816), and civil war that followed, the network may have been dormant but did not end; kept alive by family memories. Hence, some Spanish emigrants were motivated more by family ties and networks in Uruguay than by economic issues at home (cf. Devoto 2003: 33, 38).

This discussion points to the fact that trans-continental migration is characterized by greater

heterogeneity than homogeneity; homogeneity is the assumption of the Uruguayan immigration narrative outlined above. Some immigrants may have been predisposed to be unionists, anarchists, and anticlerical; but not all immigrants. What assumptions are plausible regarding the composition of Italian and Spanish immigrants based on region of origin and settlement patterns? One example of heterogeneity pertains to regional factors; researchers of Italian migration reference the vast regional difference between northern and southern Italy over time.

Table 2 is a reproduction of Gould's findings on the Italian diaspora and indicates a shift from the north to the south over a 30-year span. Because Uruguayan statistics did not record regional origins of immigrants, Goebel (2010: 200) used marriage records to determine regional origin among Spanish and Italian immigrants⁹. Due to the inadequacy of official immigration and demographic records in Uruguay, Goebel created a data set of 5,056 marriage records as a proxy for group interaction and to provide insight about the characteristics of immigrants and their descendants¹⁰. The advantage of using marriage records is that place of birth for each spouse was listed as well as nationality and occupation of both sets of parents. Based on the sample of marriage records, he was able to make the following observations about regional origins of foreigners: (1) central Italy had little representation; (2) by the 1880s, Italians came predominately (65% of males in Montevideo and equal percentage in rural areas) from the north, particularly from Liguria, Piedmont, and Lombardy. Second was the Mezzogiorno, mainly Campania, Calabria, and Basilicata (27% of males in Montevideo and 30% for rural areas); (3) by 1900s, the trend had shifted in Montevideo such that 50% of males were southerners and 42% northerners, with fewer southerners than northerners in the rural areas; and (4) in the 1920s, the percentage of southern males in Montevideo increased to 58%. In sum, according to Goebel's (2010: 200) findings, northern Italians

Table 2. Average Annual Emigration From Italy: Per Percent of the Population

Years	North	Center	South	Insular Italy
1881-1882	8.3	2.2	4.1	.06
1900-1901	14.2	9.1	18.6	7.9
1910-1912	17.3	15.4	21.1	19.5

Note: Source: (Gould 1980: 284).

arrived earlier and settled more often in the countryside while southern Italians came later and remained predominately in Montevideo¹¹. Goebel's findings are corroborated by government incentive plans thru the *Comisión Central de Inmigración* to populate the rural areas beginning in 1865 (Zubillaga 1992a: 234; Rodríguez and Sapriza 1983: 86-88). Not only was the Commission actively recruiting European immigrants thru consular agents, but had an intricate plan of essentially indentured servitude resulting in the acquisition of land suitable for an "intermediate private enterprise". The Commission evaluated the project favorably because it was profitable for the immigrant family and satisfied the government plan to colonize agricultural zones (Zubillaga 1992a: 242-243). Hence, Montevideo did not emerge as a primary location of Italian immigrant settlement until the 1890s when the majority of immigrants were southerners¹².

Region of origin may have implications if we accept generalizations regarding cultural and traditional differentiations. For example, Putnam (1993: 121-148) argued that Italian immigrants coming from the south were inclined to be agricultural workers, poorer, and accustomed to a more feudalistic social order dominated by aristocratic land owners in which the church served as an authoritative institution. In the south, there was virtually no industry and no large cities. Northern Italians, in contrast, were more inclined to be: (1) a part of Italy's industrialization; (2) living in an urban area; (3) engaged in the 1848-1849 upheavals; and (4) conditioned by unionization and

anticlerical dispositions. If we accept these generalizations, we would expect to find some Italian immigrants in Montevideo receptive to the church and others who conform to the *Garibaldino* motif (cf. Rossi 1989). It seems reasonable to expect that heterogeneity of social conditioning related to place of origin would not have produced a homogeneous critical mass of Italian immigrants in Uruguay who were collectively predisposed towards anticlericalism; especially when we consider neighborhood settlement patterns.

SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

Researchers who have looked closely at neighborhood settlement patterns among Italian immigrants recognize that mutual aid societies played an important role in facilitating immigrant adjustment and provide important insight regarding social dynamics and community organization. Mutual aid societies were an important community resource because they helped immigrants find employment, locate housing, establish meaningful social relations, defend their interests, and improve working and living conditions. Therefore, understanding how mutual aid societies functioned within Italian immigrant communities should help to evaluate the degree to which the "social base" of the immigrant community in Uruguay was significantly anticlerical as many researchers have hypothesized.

Mutual aid societies were not an immigrant innovation but emerged in principally northern Italy as

a voluntary organization providing a means for trade and craft associations to continue when guilds were abolished. The principal aim of societies was to provide rudimentary social insurance such as old-age pension, sick pay, funeral costs, and other forms of benevolence to members and their families. Clark (1984: 76) suggested that societies emerged due to expediency at a time when traditional Catholic charities were disrupted due to political conflict and before the state introduced its own social security. In general, societies were viewed positively by the ruling class as a source of collaboration among workers, to promote education, morality, and contribute to the public good. While Neufeld (1961: 60-63) and Clark (1984: 75-78) agreed that formative societies did not take on a class conscience—they were mixed assemblies which included craftsmen of all trades including masters and employees—they disagreed over the political nature of societies. Clark suggested that societies were committed to a particular political view be it conservative, clerical, or republican while Neufeld suggested they were strictly apolitical and focused on social welfare. In addition, they provided conflicting accounts of the political orientation of societies; especially in regard to their adhesion to the church. The Institute of Catholic Congresses and Committees of Italy (*Opera dei Congressi e dei Comitati Cattolici d'Italia*) founded in 1874 gave rise to a structure of lay committees in parishes and diocese as well as organized periodic congresses. Created to reunite Catholic associations in order to defend the rights of the Pope, *Opera dei* also served to unite Catholic social interests. The Institute was divided into two divisions: one to works of charity and one to the moral and economic conditions of tradesmen and agriculture workers thru mutual aid societies (Neufeld 1961: 182). Although Clark (1984: 87) cited that by 1883, there were 993 parish committees in the north, 263 in central Italy, and 57 in the south, he also stated that they were not numerous to the degree that only one parish in 10 had a

committee. However, by 1897, the *Opera dei* claimed 3,982 parish committees, 708 youth sections, 17 university circles, 688 worker associations, 588 rural banks, 24 daily newspapers, 105 periodicals, and many other organizations and activities, mostly concentrated in Veneto, Lombardy, and the Piedmont (Clark 1984: 107). Where Neufeld and Clark differ is over the political orientation of these associations. Neufeld (1961: 183) stated that the mutual aid societies had been monopolized by the democratic-liberal elements of the Mazzinian-Garibaldian persuasion thus assumed an anticlerical disposition; which if true, manifested an implacable aversion towards the church. Neufeld did cite that by 1887, traditional Catholic mutual aid societies made a come-back, maintained a confessional disposition under the guidance of ecclesiastic authorities, and indicated concern for a full range of labor problems thus giving rise to Catholic labor leagues. However, Clark (1984: 87, 107) argued that from the beginning, the *Opera dei* fought against the established liberal order and operated under a new centralized church committed to creating a national Catholic movement opposed to the liberal state. In fact by 1897, the movement of Catholic intransigents had become so strong that it posed a threat to the liberal government prompting the Prime Minister to crack down on Catholic associations and ban meetings that were viewed contrary to the liberal order. What Clark (1984: 108) referred to as the “persecution of 1897-1898” resulted in the abolition of the traditional Catholic network of social, educational, and economic associations that had come to represent Social Catholicism in that timeframe. The importance of this discussion is that mutual aid societies were effective means of organization and association that served both anticlerical and traditional Catholic interests.

What we know about mutual aid societies in Latin America comes principally from research in Buenos Aires. In his comparative study of Italian immigrants

in Buenos Aires and New York City between 1870 and 1914, Baily (1982; 1983; 1999; 2003) had looked closely at informal and formal institutions of family, household, and local neighborhood. Mutual aid societies were an important formal institution in the lives of most Italian immigrants regardless of destination. Mutual aid societies not only provided assistance to new immigrants and facilitated adjustment to a new world, but provided space where the immigrant community could share resources, exchange social capital, find employment, locate professional services, etc. Baily's study includes maps of immigrant communities which typically include ethnic local business, schools, and other small institutions, including a church. Frequently local churches also served as a functional mutual aid society. Italian immigrants in Buenos Aires have generated numerous studies utilizing mutual aid societies as a unit of analysis. From these studies, we know that mutual aid societies did not represent a monolithic block of unified interests but manifested intra-ethnic tensions. Gandolfo (1992) found that Italian anarchists and socialists came to resent the mutual aid societies that would not support militant labor activities and found such societies to be in competition rather than complement the labor movement. In spite of ethnic commonalities, political tensions in the larger immigrant community found their way into mutual aid societies typically between supporters of Garibaldi-Mazzini republicanism or conservative monarchists who, even after Italian unification were hoping for reconciliation between church and state. Bailey (1999: 174) studied the history of the *Unione e Benevolenza*, the oldest and largest society in Buenos Aires and found that conflict between republicans and royalists led to the withdrawal of dissident royalists in order to find their own society (*Nazionale Italiana*) while a few years later radical republicans also split off over a dispute to find an autonomous society. In larger societies, Cibotti (1988) found leadership in the *Unione* to be dominated by wealthy merchants,

businessmen, and lawyers and in a network with other important institutions in Buenos Aires; while the majority of members consisted of the working class. Although relationships between leaders and working class members were clientelistic, workers supported the society because of the benefits offered. Not all mutual aid societies were prone to internal conflict. Estrada (1992) found that if societies wanted to be serviceable and fulfill their benevolent objectives, societies had to be apolitical. In terms of internal dynamics, societies—although with hundreds of members enlisted—experienced low participation at meetings and for this reason, only met every six months. Estrada (1992) found three levels of membership: (1) executive; (2) intermediate functionaries; and (3) the majority was characterized by passive members. Estrada found that outside of a few larger and well-established mutual aid societies, most societies were small, unstable, and collapsed after a few years; especially when a worker-pension had to be paid. In terms of linkages to labor union formation in Montevideo, Zubillaga (1992a: 244-245) found that mutual aid societies served as a base of recruitment for labor unions but that participation was diversified due to a plurality of union ideologies usually consolidated under the banner of a larger labor organization; there were socialists (*Unión General de Trabajadores*); anarchists (*La Federación Obrera Regional*), and Christian-socialists (*Círculos Católicos de Obreros del Uruguay*).

In spite of political orientations, how did religion factor into mutual aid societies? Health care was not the only benefit offered by mutual aid societies. Frid de Silberstien (1992) found that in Rosario, although anticlerical societies had been long established and had created five laical schools, Salesians came to Rosario in 1878 and thru informal associational networks were able to create a full service educational system that included a primary school, a night school for adults (*artes y oficios*), and children's schools of skills and crafts (*oratorios festivos*). By 1906, two

Salesiano schools in Rosario had more students than five *escuelas mutuas Italianas* combined. According to Devoto's (1991: 228) case study of barrio *La Boca*, "it was the most anticlerical in the city of Buenos Aires". Devoto found Salesians implementing Don Bosco's strategy that was successful in Piamonte and Liguria; a school of *Festivos Oratorios*, which disarmed parents by providing education combined with games and religious instruction in the open air led to the establishment of a primary school, supplemented by a school for girls founded by the *Hermana de María Auxiliadora*, who were supported by a lay-led Catholic Association of Mutual Aid; *Cofradía de la Virgen de Carmen* and *Cofradía Sagrado Corazón de Jesús*. A few years later were joined by the Conference of St. Vincent of Men and Women and Catholic Youth Society. Devoto explains that the key to the Salesian success was that the priests spoke the same dialect as the people in the barrio. It was the inability of the Scalabrini missionaries to speak the local dialect that Favero (1989) attributed to the failure of the Scalabrini work in Buenos Aires. Forming a community of priests, who were to be the nucleus of a new congregation composed of priests who came from Cuba, Philippines, and Spain, did not appeal to the Italian immigrants who wanted the mass in their native tongue.

Unfortunately, studies of mutual aid societies in Montevideo are lacking. What we know about mutual aid societies comes principally from Rossi (1989) whose thesis suggests that Italian immigration constitutes the origins of militant anticlericalism that characterized Uruguayan liberalism. Rossi specifically argues that Italian immigrants represented a populist current that became the heart of the Colorado party under *batllismo* which was expressed as a form of Jacobinism. The study however offers very little quantitative data. Rossi identifies eight mutual aid societies in Montevideo in 1910 totaling 5,364 members; 3,778 of the members are associated with *Societa Italiana di Mutuo Soccorso*. If we accept

Rial's figures for the 1908 National Census, there were approximately 40,112 Italians in Montevideo. This corresponds to one mutual aid society member for every 5,014 Italians living in Montevideo (or 13% of Montevideo's Italians).

Possibly the most reliable study concerning the relationship between Italian immigration and anticlerical orientation has been conducted by Carlos Zubillaga (1992b). The objective of Zubillaga's (1992a: 68) study is to clarify the relationship among "Italian immigration, anticlericalism, philosophical liberalism, and irreligiosity". The difficulty separating fact from fiction can be attributed to Garibaldi's participation in the *Guerra Grande* from 1841-1848 which made him a legendary hero in Uruguay. Carlos Rama's work entitled, *Garibaldi en Uruguay* (1968) provided some academic credibility to Garibaldi's contribution to *Risorgimento*. However, Zubillaga cites that because political conflicts of the *patria* were followed intensely by members of the immigrant community—in some cases generated the reason for emigration—partisanship was inevitable; as was class division. Italian elites who were conversant with liberal and positivist creed and who had taken part in various conflicts in *Risorgimento* found consonance with local intellectualism and political elites in Montevideo. However, for the working class and peasant immigrants, identity was shaped more importantly by region than by national citizenship. Therefore, ideologies and interests were as fragmented as *paesani* groups. After the conquest of Rome in 1870, and the Mazzinian influence diminished, the "Roman question" emerged thus reinforcing clerical and anticlerical partisanship. Hence, September 20 every year after became a divisive event and a reminder of the multiple associative structures. The discussion in Congress in 1883 to erect a monument of Garibaldi in Montevideo was controversial and contentious thus reflecting the incessant fragmentation.

Corresponding to the same timeframe, Zubillaga uses material found in the archives of the Curia to

substantiate the pastoral action of principally the Salesians and Capuchinos who, thru the means of festive oratory schools of skills and crafts, penetrated modest working-class barrios of Italian immigrants; with names such as *Vittorio Emanuel II*, *Garibaldino*, *Nueva Savona*, and *Nuevo Genova*. These were followed by schools for girls founded by the *Hijas de María Santísima del Huerto*, and the *Sales de la Visitación de Santa María*. One of the most important factors contributing to pastoral action was the capacity to speak the dialect of the barrio. Commitments to formal institutions were complemented by popular religiosity which took on a “*manera Italiana*” and were public and ostentatious, representing local devotions to *San Cono*, *Virgen de las Flores*, and *Virgen de Pompeya*, depending on the consecration of the barrio. Zubillaga found letters pertaining to 70 Italian clergy who arrived between 1850 and 1930 not to mention those who entered vocations and were trained in the *Seminario Conciliar* in Montevideo. Zubillaga’s (1992b: 69) thesis, in comparison to Rossi, is that Italian immigration to Uruguay was not a homogeneous universe but characterized by multiple affinities including religious practices and traditions manifested within the context of the barrio. Zubillaga (1993: 68) cited documents from the *Comisión Central Directiva de Inmigración* containing baptismal records among immigrants. In 1868, the document cites 1,919 immigrant males in intermarriages to Uruguayans who sought to baptize their children, of whom 519 (29.7%) were Italian, and of 1,232 immigrant women in exogamous marriages to Uruguayans, 366 (29.7%) were Italian. If we accept demographic figures from 1868, Italians were approximately 13% of the immigrant population. In 1908, 6,797 immigrant males baptized their children, of whom 1,746 (25.7%) were Italian men, while among 5,722 foreign women, 1,423 (24.9%) Italian wives sought to baptize their children at a time when Italians represented 34.4% of the total immigrant population. The proportion of Italian immigrant

families, albeit in exogamous marriages, who sought baptism for their children exceeded what would be expected given the anticlerical narrative associated with Italian immigrants. Other researchers (Geymonat 2004: 162; Barrán 1988: 6) who question the “Garibaldi thesis” do so on the basis of the 1889 *Censo del Departamento de Montevideo* which disaggregates self-identified religious categories into “*Nacionales*” and “*Extranjeros*”. In Montevideo, 80% of nationals self-identified themselves as Catholics while 8% were self-identified as liberals in comparison to 87% of foreigners identified themselves as Catholic and 6% were self-identified liberals. Barrán (1988: 6) stated that “The 1889 Census shows that if impiety and indifference have invaded the country, the responsibility does not correspond to the immigrant profile because they appear to be less incredulous”.

CONCLUSIONS

The counter-arguments presented here, while not invalidating the “social base” and “weak institutional church” claims, make it more difficult to assume that urban demographics and ecclesiastical history in Uruguay are significantly correlated to the secularization of Uruguayan society. While not irrelevant, it is possible that the explanatory power of these factors is weaker than previously assumed. Hence, it is necessary to re-conceptualize the secularization process by considering several theoretical frameworks which, by virtue of their abstract properties, differentiate among historical contingencies and conjunctive events thus yielding a more persuasive causal explanation¹³. A common limitation shared by the two theories discussed above is their methodological and empirical inadequacy to explain why Uruguay came to be a secular nation at the end of the nineteenth century. It is the author’s contention that this research project needs a theoretical framework that focuses on conflict and

contestation among human agents whose social projects compete in order to decide the outcome of the relationship of religion in modernity.

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Notes

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1. According to Godoy Urrutia's study on literacy in 1952, he identifies Costa Rica with the smallest proportion of indigenous peoples at .03% (4,200) of the population, smallest only next to Uruguay which does not appear in his analysis at all.
2. For a more nuanced view of early evangelization of the Uruguayan area, see Di Stefano (1998); Morner (2003); and Cayota (1994).
3. *El Censo Municipal del Departamento de la Ciudad de Montevideo*, 1892: 364-370 (cf. Barrán 1988: 6; Villegas 1987: 24).
4. Juan Rial (1981: 50), the most esteemed Uruguayan demographer, made the following evaluation regarding the challenges of accurately quantifying immigration and demography in this era: "The Directors of Census and Statistics recently realized that the accounting of annals of population beginning in 1882 were, in many cases, evidently wrong". Regarding the limited availability and reliability of data, Rial (1981: 51) wrote: "Between 1908 and 1963, there were no Census on the national level, only up-dates on the department level and of very poor quality". Regarding the accounting of foreign immigrant, Rial (1981: 53) wrote: "...although between 1905 and 1912, the impressionistic testimonies indicate an increase in the number of European immigrants, lamentably, it is difficult to quantify because the corresponding list of passengers

from 1906 to 1912 has been lost". Clearly demographers have been frustrated in attempting to produce accurate figures of European immigration and demographics in the era under study.

5. Recognized sources are: (1) National census 1852, 1860, and 1908; (2) population estimates by the acting director of the Direction of General Statistics of 1879; (3) census of Montevideo 1843, 1889; (4) diverse departmental censuses between 1888 and 1895; (5) census of all departments except Montevideo in 1990; (6) notebooks of the Direction of General Statistics: 1880-1884; and (7) *Anuarios Estadísticos de la Dirección de Estadística General*: 1885-1930.
6. Hanson (1979: 9) suggested the average net migration to Uruguay between 1879 and 1903 was 4,000 annually.
7. Rothman (1969: 714) explained the reason she began with 1895 data for Uruguay is because "estimations have a certain degree of reliability because they have been performed after the evaluations and corrections of historical data". Argentina, in contrast to Uruguay experienced an average natural increase (difference between births and deaths) between 1895 and 1919 of 35.9 per thousand whereas the net contribution of immigration to the total population growth for the same period was 12.3 per thousand. Clearly, immigration was of greater significance in Argentina than in Uruguay (See Devoto 1991; 2003: 33).
8. Apart for a brief period of intentional colonization (1852-1880), fiscal lands were more available and easier to acquire in Argentina than Uruguay. Political instability, poorer economic opportunity, and the lack of land for agricultural use were factors that limited immigration to Uruguay (Rock 2000; Hanson 1979; Oddone 1966a).
9. Goebel (2010: 194-195) also cited problems of the immigration data in the National and Municipal Census records. He cites the lack of disaggregated data (occupation, religion, region of origin, or nationality of parents), lumping together significant numbers of Brazilians and Argentines with Europeans, and the failure to record on-migration to Argentina. The lack of reliable quantitative data is why he used marriage records from the civil registry (*Archivo: Dirección General del Registro Civil*) for his study on Spanish and Italian immigrants in Uruguay.
10. The sample consisted of a proportional distribution of marriage records representing Montevideo (urban) and Canelones, Colonia and Paysandú (rural) from 1889, 1907-1908, and 1928 in order to utilize longitudinal analysis. Goebel (2010: 195-196) included only marriages with at least one foreign spouse.
11. As comparative data, Goebel references the work of Camou and Pellegrino (1993: 57) who looked at Italian emigration statistics which corroborate a higher proportion of

southerners among immigrants to Uruguay: 78.3% in 1890s; 69.3% in the 1900s; and 71.8% in the 1910s.

12. Zubillaga (1992a: 235) added that the majority of Italian immigrants that participated in the Commission's rural settlement program came from Liguria, Piamonte, Lombardía, Veneto, and to a lesser degree, Tuscany.
13. For recent theories pertaining to secularization, see "anti-religious elite theory", Smith (2003; 2008); "religious economy theory", Stark and Finke (2000); and "existential security theory", Norris and Inglehart (2004).

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