

Agrarian history in Uruguay: From the “agrarian question” to the present

MARÍA INÉS MORAES

KEYWORDS: agrarian history, Latin American rural history, agrarian question, Uruguay.

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This paper analyses Uruguayan historiography on agrarian and rural themes from 1970 to the present. It is not a directory of authors or contributions, nor does it present bibliometric indicators to describe the agrarian historiography of Uruguay. The main point of this article is that the rise and fall of Uruguayan rural historiography depict the life cycle of what Imre Lakatos called a research programme (Lakatos, 1983). This research programme was born in the 1950s and had its progressive stage between 1960–89. From then to the beginning of the new century, the programme underwent what is called the regressive stage in Lakatos’s terms. This article closes with some references to the main lines of what may be an emerging research programme. I hope that the Uruguayan case may contribute to a broader reflection on Latin American rural historiography during the last five decades.

La historia agraria en Uruguay: De «la cuestión agraria» al presente

PALABRAS CLAVE: historia agraria, historia rural latinoamericana, cuestión agraria, Uruguay.

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***E**n este documento se analiza la historiografía uruguaya sobre temas agrarios y rurales desde 1970 hasta la actualidad. No es un directorio de autores o contribuciones, ni presenta indicadores bibliométricos para describir la historiografía agraria de Uruguay. El argumento central de este artículo es que el auge y la caída de la historiografía rural uruguaya describen el ciclo de vida de lo que Imre Lakatos llamó un programa de investigación (Lakatos, 1983). Este programa de investigación nació en la década de 1950 y tuvo su etapa progresiva entre 1960 y 1989. Desde entonces hasta el comienzo del nuevo siglo, el programa pasó por lo que se denomina la etapa regresiva en términos de Lakatos. El presente artículo se cierra con algunas referencias a las principales líneas de lo que podría ser un programa de investigación emergente. Se espera que el caso uruguayo contribuya a una reflexión más amplia sobre la historiografía rural latinoamericana de los últimos cinco decenios.*

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María Inés Moraes [orcid.org/0000-0003-1202-5988] is Full Professor at Universidad de la República (Uruguay). Address: Institute of Economics, Faculty of Economics and Administration, 1921 Lauro Müller, 1200 Montevideo (Uruguay). E-mail: imoraes@ccee.edu.uy

1. INTRODUCTION

Like many Latin American countries, during the 20th century, Uruguay developed a long tradition of studies on agrarian systems. Economists, sociologists, and historians worked together on agrarian topics such as the land tenure system, the causes and consequences of the *latifundia*, the social structure in the countryside, peasant revolts, and many related issues. Among historians, research on the rural past experienced a peak from the 1960s to the 1980s. Several books published in those years would eventually become classics of Uruguayan historiography and historians of different generations worked in the field. However, in the last decade of the 20th century, agrarian history lost ground significantly to new fields that began to attract the attention of historians, and, in the 21st century, it occupies a marginal position in current historiography.

This paper analyses Uruguayan historiography on agrarian and rural themes from 1970 to the present. It is not a directory of authors or contributions, nor does it present bibliometric indicators to describe the agrarian historiography of Uruguay. Instead, this work offers an interpretative hypothesis about the rise and fall of Uruguayan agrarian history based on some concepts of Hungarian philosopher Imre Lakatos (1922-74).

The main point of this article is that the rise and fall of Uruguayan rural historiography depicts the life cycle of what Lakatos called a *research programme*. This concept provides a useful metaphor to understand the rise, the heyday, and the decline of a specific agenda and set of historiographical practices. This research programme was born in the 1950s and had its progressive stage between 1960-89. It was carried out jointly by historians, economists, and sociologists, but historians played a leading role in the development of the programme for reasons that will be seen later. Seminal works with significant influence on the country’s intellectual and political circles were written during the progressive stage of the programme. However, from 1989 to the beginning of the new century, this programme underwent what is called the *regressive stage* in Lakatos’s terms.

Meanwhile, new venues were opened to new generations of historians. Agrarian history as a field decreased and declined, research on rural history waned, and books on the topic almost disappeared from bookshops. Finally, the decay of the old programme made room for new lines of inquiry on the rural past. This article closes with some references to the main lines of what may be an emerging research programme. I hope that the Uruguayan case may contribute to a broader reflection on Latin American rural historiography during the last five decades.

In many Western countries during the second half of the 20th century, agrarian history became a prestigious and dynamic field of study. In many European countries, this apogee ended sometime between 1970 and 1990, and, after some confusion, subsequent generations of historians reconfigured the field and took up the thread of agricultural history (Brunel & Moriceau, 1995; Saavedra, 2007). The new agrarian history was not as central to the agenda of European historians of the 21st century as it had been in the past, but, in more than a few cases –among them the Spanish one–, the field enjoyed good health and displayed remarkable vitality, asking new questions and crafting new research tools (Soto & Lana, 2018). In Latin America, a similar story occurred.

The history of past agrarian systems was almost an obsession among Latin American post-war historians between 1950 and 1980. A complete list of authors and books would exceed the scope of this text. The main lines of inquiry were the rise of new landholdings (*hacienda* and plantation) in the colonial agricultural systems, free and unfree types of labour, the functioning of agricultural markets and prices, and, finally, the capitalist transformation experienced by Latin American agrarian systems during the export-led growth model (1870-1914). Concerning the 20th century, peasant revolts gained the attention of historians, mainly but not exclusively in Mexico.

Nevertheless, a reconfiguration of Latin American agrarian history took place from the 1980s onwards. New perspectives, new themes, and new tools emerged, as was recently summarized by Ausdal (2013). In the same vein, an environmental history of Latin America has emerged in recent decades (Leal, Soluri & Pádua, 2019; Sánchez-Calderón & Blanc, 2019).

2. A BRIEF REVIEW OF LAKATOS

In opposition to Popper's falsificationism, Lakatos formulated the concept of research programmes as conceptual/theoretical organized structures that, according to the author, define the agenda and guide the activity of science over time (Lakatos, 1983). According to Lakatos, what gives continuity to the activity of a scientific community is the presence of these organized theoretical structures, which he called *research programmes*.

Lakatos stated that a research programme has the following components: a *hardcore*, a *protective belt*, a *negative heuristic*, and a *positive heuristic*. The hardcore of the programme is a set of foundational propositions that its followers cannot reject or modify. In a classic example, the hardcore of the Newtonian physics programme was the law of universal gravitation and the laws of motion formulated by Newton. Thus, the physicists who

worked in the Newtonian programme intended not to prove or reject those laws but to solve empirical issues such as making available evidence on the planetary orbits to fit with Newton’s laws. In Lakatos’s words: *The protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses must hold the impacts of the empirical testing, and in order to protect the hardcore, it will be adjusted and readjusted and even completely replaced* (Lakatos, 1983: 53). The negative heuristic of a research programme indicates what cannot be done; it presents the researchers with the impossibility of questioning the contents of the hardcore at the risk of questioning its validity.

In contrast, the positive heuristic is a set of clues or suggestions on how to build, preserve, and correct the protective belt. The positive heuristic defines an order and some themes to defend the core against both theoretical insufficiencies and empirical *anomalies* (Lakatos, 1983: 55). Finally, Lakatos argued that research programmes somehow have a life cycle; they have a *progressive* stage followed by a *regressive* or degenerative stage. In the progressive stage, researchers succeed in increasing both their empirical results and their theoretical statements at the hardcore level. However, when a research programme enters the degenerative stage, researchers no longer experience such increases, and the programme is headed for failure (*Ibid.*: 55). Lakatos stated that, when a programme stops anticipating new facts, the negative heuristic gives way, the hardcore faces the possibility of being abandoned, and the programme must be considered defeated or exhausted. Somehow the programme enters a phase in which its heuristic potential is in decline, inconsistencies arise that are difficult to resolve, new facts cannot be incorporated, and ad-hoc hypotheses proliferate; the degenerative phase of the programme is pervasive, and soon a rival research programme will appear. Despite the dark tone, Lakatos thought that this dynamic of rising programmes competing with retreating programmes does not harm the progress of science; he believed the opposite. He stated:

The history of science has been and must be a history of competing research programs (or if you prefer, of ‘paradigms’), but it has not been and must not become a succession of periods of normal science. The sooner the competition begins, the better for progress. The ‘theoretical pluralism’ is better than the ‘theoretical monism’; on this point, Popper and Feyerabend are right, and Kuhn is wrong (Ibid.: 75).

3. THE HARDCORE OF THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME ON THE AGRARIAN HISTORY OF URUGUAY

In the economic history of Uruguay, the agricultural economy has played a fundamental role. The country has been and continues to be an exporter of primary products, and

the rural segments of the dominant classes have played a leading role in the country's political and social history. Thus, it is not surprising that, since the early 20th century, different kinds of writings have reckoned with the countryside's past (Berro, 1975; Caviglia, 1935). Nevertheless, it was not until the second half of the 20th century that agrarian history came to occupy a central place on the agenda of historians: during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Uruguayan agrarian history had its heyday. An entire research programme about rural themes took form. A few aspects of the programme evoked the so-called *agrarian question*.

As is very well known, this was the name given in the Marxist tradition to a set of theoretical discussions that took place in late 19th-century and early 20th-century Europe concerning the path to capitalism in European countries and Russia (Levien, Watts & Hairong, 2018). However, an "agrarian question" had also been discussed in Latin American academia since the 1930s, framed by the growing influence of Marxist thinking on scholars and intellectuals.

The influence of Marxism on post-war Latin American academia is well known (Love, 1994; Maiguashca, 2014). However, the "agrarian question" was introduced earlier in Latin America, after the Sixth Congress of the Third International, held in Moscow in 1928 (Chust, 2015).

That conference of the Comintern stated a thesis that labelled the Latin American region as *semi-feudal* and *semi-colonial*. The first label meant that Latin America had not reached the capitalist stage, and the second meant that Latin America was under the strong influence of capitalist-imperialist powers, such as Great Britain and the United States. Consequently, at the conference, a strategy was approved to reach socialism in Latin America, which required the previous consummation of the so-called *bourgeois-democratic revolution* through the creation of a *national liberation front* on which the Communist parties would ally themselves with the modernizing fractions of the Latin American national bourgeoisies (Chust, 2015). These guidelines started a lasting debate among Marxist Latin American intellectuals outside the Communist parties. The historical roots of the land tenure system, class exploitation in the countryside, and peasant revolts since colonial times shaped the Latin American debate on the "agrarian question". In the 1960s, the "agrarian question" was widely discussed in academic and political circles. In 1973, the debate on the semi-feudal condition of Latin American colonial economies reached an intellectual peak with the now-famous volume no. 40 of *Cuadernos de Pasado y Presente* on the modes of production in Latin America, published in Buenos Aires. Today, the Latin American "agrarian question" is far from being a priority field among historians, but, as will eventually be seen, rural issues have not disappeared from the agenda.

In the case of post-war Uruguay, the conversation about the rural past gave rise to a full-fledged research programme. The hardcore of this programme consisted of two propositions. The first stated that the Uruguayan economy is *underdeveloped* (or *pre-capitalist*, according to the author’s theoretical language) and *dependent* (or *semi-colonial*, according to the same). The second asserted that social relations in the countryside are the root of both underdevelopment and dependence and therefore must be changed radically. Eliminating large rural property, the primary source of exploitation in the countryside and the cities, was an obvious and politically urgent step to take. These propositions were widely diffused in academic circles after the Second World War. The condemnation of the land tenure system had a long history, as has been documented in Mexico (Kouri, 2009) and Argentina (Hora, 2018).

In Uruguay, the condemnation of *latifundio* also has antecedents in the late colonial period and in the policies of the revolutionary military chief José Artigas (1811-20) (Caetano & Ribeiro, 2015). In the early 20th century, some political and intellectual circles put the condemnation onto a new basis, as we will see later. Although landed elites managed to block some reforms that could erode land concentration, their political rivals won the ideological war. Anti-*latifundia* feelings stood and grew during the 20th century among intellectuals and politicians of different ideological lineages¹.

However, condemnation of *latifundia* reached its most detailed, radical, and influential version within the research programme of the “agrarian question”. At the hardcore of the programme lay the notion that Uruguay’s capitalist development could not be consummated without radical agrarian reforms. As a result of the negative heuristics, these statements were not exposed to testing but worked as starting points for a dense and coherent “protective belt”, built not only by historians but also by practitioners of various social sciences.

In the remainder of this text, I will focus on the contribution to the protective belt made by historians during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, but I will also mention the contributions made by economists. Together, these contributions built an entire narrative about the Uruguayan agrarian past that is still in force. One of the most remarkable aspects of the programme was that the historical narrative was accepted as a valid tool by the positive heuristic. In part, this was a result of a kind of methodological coincidence between

1. As examples, two Catholic intellectuals (CHIARINO & SARALEGUI, 1944) and a prominent liberal sociologist (SOLARI, 1953) penned seminal studies that pointed to large private property holdings as the main problem to solve in the countryside. Their works were very influential in Uruguayan academia.

economists and historians. Uruguayan economists were prone to adopt a narrative style of research, since they were not yet involved in the *formalist revolution* (Blaug, 2003) that would erect economic modelling a proper economic methodology. On the other hand, since the historians in Uruguay were enthusiasts of the *Annales* school, which privileged the *longue durée*, they eagerly read geography, economics, and demography in search of clues about the past.

4. BUILDING THE PROTECTIVE BELT

Most of the theses that formed the protective belt were born in the 1960s. It is worth mentioning three remarkable features of the local academic context in those years. First, both history and economics were new academic fields in Uruguay. The first Uruguayan university degree in history was established in 1948. Ten years later, the first graduates, under the influence of French historiography, started to conduct research on the economic and social problems of the past (Zubillaga, 2002: 160-72). Meanwhile, economics experienced an invigorating boost after 1961, when the government created a commission committed to making a diagnosis of the economic and social situations of the country. From 1961 until 1967, as part of the commission's working plan, dozens of young economists were trained as researchers by senior scholars from the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) based in Santiago de Chile (Garcé, 2009).

Second, as in many Latin American countries, the Marxist thinking in the 1960s was widely diffused, studied, and debated in academic circles. Marxism became a new common language to academic and political actors. Besides, after the de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union (1956) and the Cuban Revolution (1959), the Marxist-Leninist parties of Uruguay embarked on strategic renewal, which brought about intense debates. One of the debates dealt with the "semi-feudal" condition of the Uruguayan economy. It was a topic of particular interest for leaders and intellectuals of the Uruguayan Communist Party. In 1962, the Secretary of the Communist Party labelled the Uruguayan agrarian economy as *semi-feudal* and proposed an *agrarian, anti-feudal and anti-imperialist* socialist revolution (Arismendi, 1962; Battegazzore, 2009). Finally, communists were not alone in the Marxist field. Towards the end of the 1960s, dependency theory came into Uruguayan academia. A new Marxist-but-not-Leninist thinking firmly defied both the Communist Party thesis on the semi-feudal condition and the theoretical framework developed by the economists of ECLA (Messina, 2019).

Third, as in almost every Latin American country, Uruguay underwent an acute economic and political crisis in the late 1960s, the history and meaning of which gave place

to dense literature that is beyond the scope of this article (Marchesi & Markarian, 2012). At the end of the decade, social and political unrest peaked. Parliament, streets, workplaces, and classrooms witnessed political clashes, often violent ones. The academic community was deeply touched by these changes (Markarian, 2016). Historians rejected neutrality in the writing of history and defended their role as intellectuals involved in the social struggles of their times. Therefore, many of them were engaged in what was later called an *activist* writing of history (Zubillaga, 2004). In this setting, historians and economists started to work together to develop a protective belt for the programme’s hardcore.

Diagram 1 summarizes the main propositions of the protective belt. Appropriately linked, these statements provide a narrative on the history of Uruguayan agriculture from the colonial period to 1970. Historians contributed propositions concerning the facts and processes of the colonial period, the 19th century, and the early 20th century, while economists worked on problems dating from 1930 onwards.

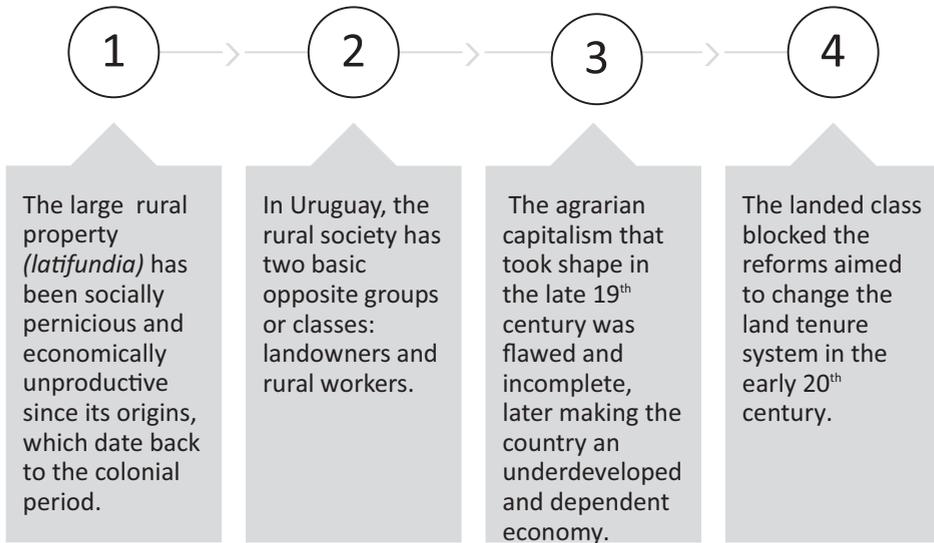
Several teams and individuals worked on the development of the protective belt. They did not follow a coordinated working plan but formed a very active academic community, discussing and working on a common agenda. The most used theories were Marxism in different versions, the centre-periphery economic model of ECLAC, and the dependency theory.

When completed, the protective belt offered a narrative about how the colonial roots of deficient agrarian structures still hindered the country’s capitalist development in the 20th century. In a nutshell, the story begins in the colonial period, when *latifundia* emerged and gave birth to a concentrated land tenure system and archaic social relations in the countryside (links 1 and 2 in Diagram 1). Later, in the second half of the 19th century, fully fledged rural capitalism could not develop because despite the many changes that the countryside experienced the highly concentrated land tenure system persisted and was even aggravated (link 3 in Diagram 1). Finally, in the early 20th century, the government’s intention to reform the land tenure system was defeated by the landed class (link 4 in Diagram 1). As a result, throughout the rest of the 20th century, the agrarian economy failed to sustain successful capitalism and compromised the country’s development (links 5, 6, and 7 in Diagram 1).

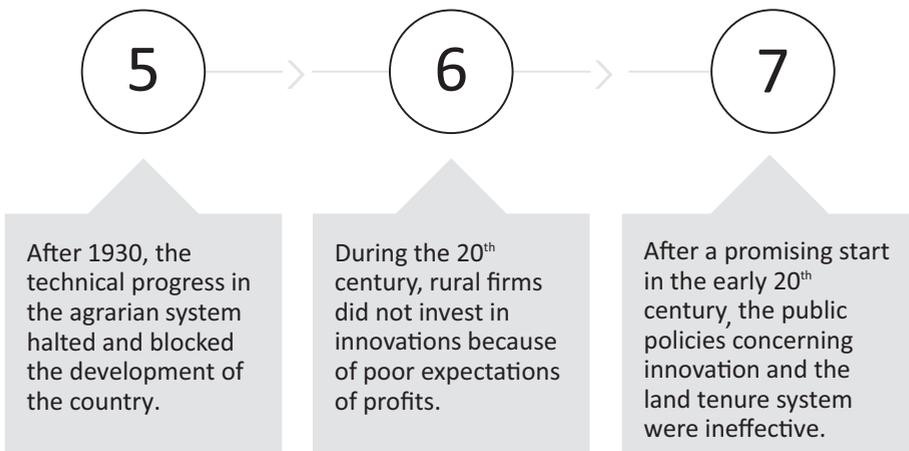
In the task of building the protective belt, Uruguayan agrarian history had its heyday. The main contributions of historians to the programme were links 1, 2, 3, and 4. The main statements were the following:

DIAGRAM 1

(A). Links of the protective belt developed by historians



(B). Links of the protective belt developed by economists



Sources: see text.

1) Large individual rural property (the *latifundio* in Spanish) had been economically unproductive and socially pernicious since its origins, which dated back to the colonial period.

As stated above, in Latin America, the essays written in the 19th century strongly condemned the *latifundia*. However, the idea gained academic respectability among the historians of the 20th century after the work of François Chevallier on the Mexican colonial *hacienda*, translated into Spanish in 1956. Chevallier’s work instigated a trail of studies on the colonial *latifundia* and their associated forms of rural work in many Latin American countries, which lasted until the 1980s (Mörner, 1975; Young, 2012). In Uruguay, there were three main contributions to this topic.

In 1952, the most influential Uruguayan historian, Eduardo Pivel Devoto, authored a book that provided many guidelines for future researchers on the Uruguayan agrarian past (Pivel, 1952). Pivel Devoto was a member of a domestic political party founded in the 19th century; for three decades, he ran the National Museum of History and left to contemporaries and future generations of Uruguayans an influential collection of books that enhanced national identity (Sansón, 2006; Vidaurreta, 1989; Zubillaga, 2002).

The book of 1952 depicted the agrarian structures that emerged in colonial times. According to the author, in the so-called Banda Oriental (the name that historians used to give to the territories that later became Uruguay), farming livestock was the principal activity, and there were two types of cattle ranch. One was the large *rustic* cattle ranch, in the hands of an absentee landlord and aiming to export cattle hides to Atlantic markets, and the other was the breeder ranch, owned by a *poor landowner* who lived on the plot and bred animals for meat. The rustic *latifundia* gave birth to absentee landlords as the upper class and to *gauchos* as typical rural workers. *Gauchos* had *semi-wild instincts*, and their way of life was *at odds with any form of authority and subjection to the legal order* (Pivel, 1952: 17). The breeding ranch, on the other hand, gave rise to a segment of industrious rural families surrounded by groups of unskilled but peaceful rural labourers. The idea of a colonial agrarian system based on two disparate types of holdings and their associated social characters and classes was passed on to later generations of historians.

Between 1967 and 1972, a team of young historians formed by Lucía Sala, Nelson de la Torre, and Julio Rodríguez published a series of four books with a single goal: to settle the popular and agrarian character of the revolution of the *caudillo* José Artigas (1811-20) and explain his defeat in terms of the class struggles (Sala, Rodríguez & Torre, 1967a, 1967b, 1969, 1972). The authors were members of the Uruguayan Communist Party, and later two of them (Lucía Sala and Julio Rodríguez) developed successful academic careers in Uruguay and abroad (González Demuro, 2003; Sansón, 2011). The authors stated that when the revolution against the Spanish Crown broke out a sharp conflict took place between the colonial landed class and the poor classes of the rural society. According to the authors, the anti-Spanish insurgency led by *caudillo* José Artigas gathered the social de-

mands of the rural poor and expressed them in a programme of radical and popular anti-*latifundia* agrarian reforms.

The books scrutinized the pre-capitalist condition of the economy and society of the Banda Oriental. They strongly supported the thesis of the semi-feudal condition. They accurately listed the pre-capitalist traits of the economy: labour was dominated by non-economic coercion and slavery, capital was dominated by commercial non-productive capital, and, last but not least, the rural economy was dominated not by the cattle breeders' holdings and the wage-labour relations but by the hide exporters' *latifundia*, which the authors described as *an essential element of all pre-capitalist traits and the basis for the existence of rural relations tinged with feudal traits* (Sala, Rodríguez & Torre, 1967a: 22).

The team formed by José Pedro Barrán and Benjamín Nahum had published in 1964 a book on the economic and social factors of the uprising against Spanish rule that was locally ignited in 1811 (Barrán & Nahum, 1997). The authors were trained as historians by Pivel Devoto, but they distanced themselves from the political allegiances of their master and instead turned left. However, they refused to define themselves as Marxists. Their book from 1964 was hugely successful, having three editions and several reprints until 1997. Like Pivel Devoto and the Sala team, they made harsh judgements about the large private properties established in colonial times. However, they pointed out that *it is false and carries an error of historical perspective* to claim that the rural population of poor landed or landless people who joined the revolution in 1811 did so because they had *land hunger* (*Ibid.*: 87). According to the authors, around 1800 vast areas of unoccupied land existed near the border with the Portuguese territories, which worked as a *safety valve* for small ranchers and less-landed people (*Ibid.*: 87).

Leaving aside these differences concerning the role of *latifundia* in the outbreak of the revolution that would end colonial rule in the early 19th century, it is remarkable that, despite political, theoretical, and even demographic differences among the authors, these three influential works actively contributed to establishing the notion that large individual rural properties (*latifundia*) had been a sign of economic backwardness since their origins in the colonial period.

2) The major social conflict in the Uruguayan countryside was between the group of large landowners and various kinds of small producers and rural workers.

The research programme of the “agrarian question” made a special effort to disentangle the social relations and conflicts derived from the land tenure system. If the *latifundia* were hegemonic rural holding, it follows that the landed class occupied the highest place in ru-

ral society. But which social groups or classes occupied the lowest place? Different answers were given to this question, depending on the historical period analysed.

Concerning the colonial period, Sala, Rodríguez and Torre (1967a) offered the most detailed picture. According to the authors, large landowners were undoubtedly in the highest position. They were mainly merchants favoured by the Spanish monopoly system as well as members of the high civil and military bureaucracy, who were attracted to agrarian business by the opportunities opened by hides exportation after 1778.

At the bottom of the social structure there was a range of free workers (mostly *gauchos*) and a few slaves. They had in common that both groups were tied to their jobs by means that were not exclusively monetary or not monetary at all. Enslaved people did not earn a wage, and *gauchos* required several additional incentives to carry out the job: the landlords usually gave them small herds and granted them permission to graze such beasts on the holding. Thus, *gauchos* and slaves were characters who confirmed the pre-capitalist condition of the colonial rural society.

Between large landowners and rural workers, there were some small cattle breeders and a few farmers. However, the authors highlighted that these groups did not form a proper rural middle class because they were subordinated to the large landowners, the only owners of the land.

Indeed, Barrán and Nahum pointed out that a rural middle class emerged only in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, mostly as a result of European migration to the country (Barrán & Nahum, 1967, 1978). After the middle of the 19th century, some British and French investors introduced new breeds of animals and new plants, improved the organization of rural holdings, and opened new markets for agrarian products. Most of them ended up as part of the old landed class, but many families of creoles and less-wealthy European migrants involved in the new activities, such as sheep breeding or vineyards, formed an emerging rural middle class. Some public policies in the 19th century also helped to create a rural middle class. The Government had been determined to create farming colonies with European migrants since the 1830s, but the attempts failed in most cases, besieged by wars, fiscal exhaustion, and land speculation. Finally, at the beginning of the 20th century, a handful of colonies of small tenants succeeded. The families were mostly European migrants, and they were devoted to dairy production. However, it was a numerically modest population that was concentrated in a particular region of the country, where some favourable geographical conditions prevailed. Thus, the small new rural middle class was not enough to radically change the old social structure of large landlords and poor workers as the main opposing social classes.

3) A flawed version of agrarian capitalism took shape in the late 19th century in Uruguay, and this made it an underdeveloped and dependent country until the present.

This thesis is an essential point of the protective belt, since it connects the *latifundia* of the past with the underdevelopment and political unrest that characterized the 1960s in Uruguay. The insight was present in many writings of the 1950s and 1960s, but it found full development in the work of Barrán and Nahum on the rise of agrarian capitalism in Uruguay (Barrán & Nahum, 1967, 1971, 1973, 1974 1977a, 1977b, 1978).

The authors studied what they called *rural modernization*, a process that occurred from the 1860s to approximately 1914. Some domestic and external circumstances inter-played to trigger a wave of investments in the countryside that brought about dramatic changes. The enclosure of rural properties, the crossbreeding of cattle and sheep, and the passage of the Rural Code transformed old practices of cattle ranching. As a result, the volume and content of agrarian output recorded outstanding growth, and Uruguay became a successful exporter of wool and beef to the eager world markets for primary products. Rural society changed accordingly. The old class of large landowners was differentiated: a new group of modernizing landlords emerged as innovators who promoted technical change. They also diffused a corporate mindset that until then had been unknown in the Uruguayan countryside. However, in some regions, traditional large landlords persisted, prone to backward techniques and social relations of personal dependence on their workers. According to the authors, the persistence of the old *latifundia* was the critical flaw of the new agrarian capitalism. The persistence of “traditional” *latifundia* was the hallmark of incomplete capitalism, or, as they called it, *blocked development* (Barrán & Nahum, 1967: 126-27).

Meanwhile, changes also occurred in the world of rural workers. The enclosure of the fields closed any opportunities for many rural workers to live with their families as *arri-mados* or *agregados* at the *latifundia*, where they had previously reared their herds and engaged in modest farming for self-consumption. Therefore, many of them lost their mixed status as partly workers and partly peasants, becoming exclusively wage earners for a large landowner. During the civil wars of the late 19th century, these new rural workers were soldiers in armed gangs led by local *caudillos*, who were often their employers (Barrán & Nahum, 1974).

Additionally, since modernized cattle ranching demanded less labour than the old form, many rural workers became unemployed and formed a new deprived and impoverished rural population (Barrán & Nahum, 1967; Jacob, 1969). To sum up, agrarian capitalism did not just leave the *latifundia* untouched but deepened the already-unequal social structure in the countryside.

4) The landed class blocked the agrarian reforms attempted by a progressive government in the 1900s.

A vibrant, modernizing political group took control of the government from 1903 to 1916 and established an entire set of policies that, according to Barrán and Nahum (1985), opened a new chapter in the history of Uruguay. The leading figure of this episode was José Batlle y Ordóñez, a liberal anti-clerical but not-positivist president belonging to the Red Party (Partido Colorado), which forged advanced labour and social reforms. The reformers faced strong opposition from the National Party (Partido Nacional, also called the White Party or Partido Blanco), traditionally a defender of the landed sectors’ interests.

From 1914 to 1916, a clash took place between the Batlle y Ordóñez Government and the landed class (Barrán & Nahum, 1985; Bertino *et al.*, 2005; Rilla, 1992). In 1913, the Government faced a fiscal deficit and could not enter the world financial market because the credit was closed due to the First World War. Then, the Government sent a tax reform to the Parliament, aiming to increase the tax burden and give more weight to direct taxes. The clash peaked in 1914, when the Government proposed to raise a real estate tax that taxed both urban and agricultural land and which had already been modified amidst great debate in 1912. In Parliament, the discussion on taxes led to a discussion on the land tenure system. The reformers fiercely condemned cattle ranching and the *latifundia* as a source of backwardness, *caudillismo*, and civil wars. Some of them even questioned the concept of private ownership of land. The debate at Parliament escalated and became heated, but the Finance Minister withdrew the project in 1914. The next year, a powerful group of large landlords established a civil organization intending to stop not only the probable agrarian reforms but the entire reforming effort of the Government. A deep divide opened between the reformers of the 1900s and the large landowners. Many historians have emphasized that, in the early 20th century, the landed class was christened as a powerful political actor by halting the vibrant reformism of Batlle y Ordóñez. It created new organizational and ideological resources which it would perfect over the century, ready to be used as weapons against new political enemies (Barrán & Nahum, 1981, 1985; Caetano, 1992).

5. THE FULLY-GROWN PROGRAMME AND THE COMING OF THE REGRESSIVE STAGE

Around 1985, the propositions of the protective belt developed by historians and economists were complete. Historians had analysed the facts and problems of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, and economists had studied the agrarian problems that arose

after the 1930s². Together, they forged a single, coherent narrative on the development of the agrarian system of the country from its colonial origins to the end of the 20th century. This narrative told a pessimistic story about the main economic activity of the country. In a nutshell, it was a narrative about how pervasive *latifundia* and a dominant landed class had often blocked or lessened innovation, economic diversification, and social modernization over the course of three centuries. As a result, agrarian capitalism and capitalist development itself were flawed in Uruguay.

In the 1990s, the research programme entered a stage of maturity and decline. Some arguments were refined and revised, but then the agrarian question was abandoned. This fact was not unrelated to important changes in the academic environment. At the end of the 20th century, the academic scene looked very different from that in the 1960s. The study of political violence and the Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s overcame the preference of historians. A new vibrant social and political history emerged and successfully filled the bookshelves and agendas of the profession (Marchesi & Markarian, 2012). Among economists, there was a growing process of internationalization that placed the local practitioners close to a new emerging *global* type of economist (Fourcade, 2006). Albeit late, the *formalist revolution* (Blaug, 2003) prevailed among economists and narrative was not any longer accepted as a valid tool in the economist's toolbox. Finally, both historians and economists suffered the crisis of Marxism's reputation that occurred after the end of the Cold War.

While the research programme on the agrarian question started to decline in Uruguay, it is remarkable that agrarian history as a field experienced a revival in many Latin American countries. In Mexico, the old lines of Chevallier's inquiry on the colonial *hacienda* started to be questioned in the 1980s, giving room to an increasing renewal of Mexican rural historiography (Tortolero, 1996; Young, 2012). In Colombia, the classic theses on the "backwardness" of colonial and 19th-century cattle ranching were also questioned (Solano, 2010; Ausdal, 2008), and the same criticism manifested in Chile (Robles, 2008), creating a new common sense of criticism of the old agrarian history (Ausdal, 2013). In Argentina, where a narrative about *latifundia* that was very similar to that of Uruguay prevailed, a sort of historiographical revolution ignited in the late 1980s and prolonged until the beginning of the 21st century. An impressive wave of works and authors, which is impossible to reference here, put into question practically all the central points that sustained the former narrative about colonial and 19th-century rural history. Later, some of the protagonists would author seminal syntheses and comments on the intellectual history of the renewal (Fradkin & Gelman, 2004; Garavaglia & Gelman, 1995; Gel-

2. The economists' links were completed with the works of ASTORI (1979) and BARBATO (1980).

man, 2017; Santilli, 2017). In summary, the new Argentinian studies questioned the “feudal” hypothesis and drastically reduced the role of large landowners in the social and political structure before 1820. They highlighted the development of colonial farming and the existence of a pastoralist and farming peasantry in the pampas while discussing old ideas about the *gaucho* as the main character in the rural labour market. They pointed out that *mestizo* rural peasant families formed the social fabric of colonial agriculture by farming, breeding, and trading in dynamic local markets of goods and labour. Varied and complex forms of interaction and trade among peasants, “Indians”, and urban agents were recorded and analysed to highlight that all of them were connected to markets. Together, these works ended with a new narrative on the origins of rural society, land tenure, and the agrarian system. At the dawn of the 21st century, this narrative became a new mainstream (Míguez, 2017).

In Brazil, agrarian history was also renewed. Many historians from the south of Brazil revised the established knowledge on the agrarian world of the 18th and 19th centuries. Unfortunately, this paper has insufficient space to mention even the most relevant works. One of the participants recently authored an insightful road map to navigate through the new historiography (Farinatti, 2018). The creation of the former Capitanía do Río Grande do Sul and its relationship with both the oldest sites of Portuguese colonization in Brazil and the adjacent territories under Castilian rule were revisited. Some historians focused on the agrarian systems of the old Capitanía, while others scrutinized the broad social and economic networks that linked the agents of those systems to the inhabitants of the nearby Spanish empire. Together, the new studies challenged the leading role of cattle ranching as the only economic activity in Brazil’s southern pampas, depicted a more complex social structure of this region in the colonial era and early 19th century, and contextualized the history of the Brazilian south in a broader spatial and political perspective, leaving aside the old approach focusing on the building of the Brazilian nation.

In this context of generalized renewal, Uruguayan agrarian history shows a less clear picture. On the one hand, the classic narrative from the old research programme is still in force in handbooks and classrooms, especially outside the field of history. On the other hand, a small group of researchers dealing with agrarian history is forging a thematic and methodological renewal.

6. THE ONGOING RENEWAL

In the following paragraphs, I will introduce the main lines of inquiry of the new approach. In the interest of disclosure, I must say that I have been and still am involved in the ef-

fort of writing a new agrarian history. Therefore, what follows is an exercise partly of historiography and partly of memory, partly an effort to give a broad picture, and partly an exercise of persuasion. Let me first summarize some new insights into the agrarian history of the colonial period.

First, the new studies have not taken the old concept of Banda Oriental for granted. The historians of the old research programme who worked on colonial and early 19th-century topics delimited their research to a territory called Banda Oriental. This territory was a kind of single geographic entity that somehow fitted –and prefigured– the territory of present Uruguay. Instead, new studies have shown that, in colonial times, the territories that make up Uruguay were not united geographically, politically or economically (Frega, 1994, 2007; Frega & Islas, 2001; Moraes, 2008, 2015a). My work has shown that, in the territories that today belong to Uruguay, there was not a single agrarian system, as inferred from the studies of the former research programme, but two (Moraes, 2008, 2011).

It is worth starting with the older agrarian system, developed in territories that today are the northern half of the country. This agrarian system was born as part of the Jesuit missions located at the heart of the Río de la Plata basin, between the rivers Paraná and Uruguay. The narrative of the “agrarian question” research programme somehow ignored the fact that, under the Jesuit rule (which ended in 1768), no fewer than five Guaraní towns were established and perfected a communal system of herding and breeding animals in those fields (Ferrés, 1975; Fúrlong, 1962; Maeder, 1992; Moraes, 2008; Sarreal, 2009). Despite being an open-field system, the borders of each town’s grazing fields (*estancias*) were vindicated and established on maps as well as in written documents, before and after the Jesuit ruling. Many archaeologists and historians have scrutinized the territorial design, technology, workforce, evolution of the output, and markets of these *estancias misioneras*, both under Jesuit control and afterwards (Barcelos, 2000; Garavaglia, 1975; La Salvia, 1988; Levinton, 2005; Moraes, 2008, 2011; Sarreal, 2009, 2011; Schmitz, Vargas & Rogge, 2017).

In the late 18th century, the rights of the Guaraní towns to their lands and livestock were disputed by many rivals, who were interested in establishing a new type of animal exploitation targeting massive exports of cattle hides. The colonial authorities acknowledged the rights of Guaraní towns over the disputed resources until the beginning of the 19th century, but after 1800 the towns were accused of being unable to care for, adequately exploit, or profit from their commons. The Royal Treasury and the large merchant-landowners from the southern non-Guaraní cities claimed their right to exploit the cattle that grazed in the Guaraní towns’ fields (Moraes, 2015b; Moraes & Rodríguez-

Arrillaga, forthcoming). Before any solution was settled, Portuguese forces suddenly conquered a broad strip of the grazing territory in 1801. The Guaraní missionary people fought and tried to defend their rights in the revolutionary years of 1811–20 but were defeated. After 1820, the ancient Guaraní missionary agrarian system was increasingly dismantled. Around the mid-19th century, the old grasslands, animals, forests, and *yerbales* were in private hands, mostly of non-Guaraní people.

In contrast, in the colonial settlements of the southern part of present Uruguay, several agrarian landscapes took shape after the mid-18th century. They were marked by clear-cut common traits, as emerged from a bundle of studies on the cities of Colonia, Montevideo, Maldonado, and some smaller towns on the northern shore of the Río de la Plata (Barreto, 2016; Biangardi, 2012, 2015; Frega, 2007; Gelman, 1998; Moraes & Pollero, 2010; Pollero, 2013; Prado, 2002; Vicario, 2012). If the countryside of Buenos Aires and other nearby regions of present Argentina are included, the similarities among them are striking (Djenderedjian, 2004). This strip of cities and their respective agrarian hinterlands formed a unique agrarian system that extended all along the Río de la Plata’s delta to the Atlantic Ocean. In each of these coastal cities, families had individual property rights over animals and land. The inhabitants combined, to varying degrees, crop farming with animal husbandry on the family properties. However, in each city, geographic, social, and economic differentiation was pervasive.

Some families managed to pay for labour, buy slaves, own large herds, crop wheat, and increase their landholdings. Meanwhile, others remained small breeders and poor farmers, unable to access any kind of labour other than the family. The wealthier landowners often had exclusive access to social networks, business, and markets, which yielded more significant profits than agriculture. Thus, the actual basis for the prosperity and power of the landed class was not their rural business but rather the contracts for supplying the Army and the Navy, combined with the participation in the broad networks that controlled the Atlantic trade of goods and enslaved people. Conversely, the members of the families at the bottom of the social hierarchy spent part of their time on family holdings and part in the labour market as free wage workers. Since the frontier was still open and labour was very scarce, they were not yet condemned to poverty. The pre-modern legal basis admitted diverse types of entitlements on land, animals, and forestry, including complete property rights, possession, many kinds of use, and even occupation. Therefore, in the south-oriented Río de la Plata, institutions and the open frontier both favoured access to land and animals for most of the creoles and European families that came from the old colonized sites of Spanish and Portuguese America.

In summary, a hypothetical historian interested in grasping the present agrarian structures in Uruguay should study not a single colonial agrarian system but two. Of course, what matters are not the numbers but the big picture obtained by looking at both systems together. Both agrarian systems arose and took shape in spaces larger than contemporary Uruguay and the so-called Banda Oriental. To the north, in an extended territory, a system took shape connected to the broader Guaraní missionary complex, drawn by the Guaraní missionary agents, markets, and institutions. To the south, a different agrarian system developed, drawn by agents, markets, and institutions in a strip of coastal cities along the Río de la Plata's delta, strongly connected with the Atlantic Ocean. The history of the two agrarian systems cannot be understood on a national scale, since they were not national or even proto-national. Instead, they were regional in scale and scope. The driving force of the Guaraní missionary system was the domestic market located one thousand kilometres away from modern Uruguay's northern border (Moraes, 2011). The driving forces of the south-oriented system were even more distant: until the mid-18th century, these agrarian economies were driven by the Potosí mining economy, and since then by the Atlantic markets (Fradkin, 2000; Barsky & Gelman, 2001). It is worth remarking that both the north-oriented and the south-oriented systems were not wrapped up in themselves. The agents of both systems knew, recognized, and interacted with each other. Sometimes the interactions were peaceful; sometimes they were violent. Therefore, not only the agents, markets, and institutions of these agrarian systems but also their success and failures over time will be grasped from a perspective broader than that of a single country. Finally, these agrarian systems experienced opposite economic performances. In the mid-18th century, the Guaraní missionary system was very successful and supported a population of over 100,000 inhabitants, while the agents of the south-oriented system still struggled to control their resources and feed a population that barely exceeded 50,000 inhabitants. However, beginning in the 1780s, the north-oriented system went into a prolonged decline in its population, output, and institutions (Maeder, 1992; Sarreal, 2009). Meanwhile, the south-oriented system grew in population, output, and territory (Moraes, 2007). In the mid-19th century, the south-oriented system was ready to become the engine of the rising export-led growth model that would credit the coastal areas of the Río de la Plata with being a land of roaring prosperity.

Now, let me consider new insights into the capitalist transformation of the late 19th century. Millot and Bertino questioned the notion that, in the late 19th century, a segment of large landowners were reluctant to innovate despite the capitalist transformation of agriculture (Millot & Bertino, 1996). Their analysis of the transition to capitalism in the agrarian system is somehow a late product of the classical research programme, but the authors were the first to overtly challenge some critical points of the established wisdom about such a topic in Uruguay. They noticed that the cattle-ranching holdings were smaller in

some regions of the country where the soils were better than average and consequently produced better grazing. They pointed out that, whatever the mindset and cultural features of the landowners of the place, the innovations propagated quickly for environmental and economic reasons. The same reasons meant that, in the areas of the country with less fertile soils, large cattle-ranching holdings predominated and technical change propagated slowly. Thus, the size of the holdings was not the result of feudal-like grabbing by greedy landowners but stemmed from an economic rationale. They concluded that, during the transition to capitalism, the pace of technical progress had been the result of physical and economic determinants instead of cultural or psychological ones.

The same argument appeared in a recent study. The author used an extensive data set on soil qualities and rainfall regimes for the period 1880-1914 at the sub-province district level for the whole country and applied spatial econometric tools to conclude that there was no statistically significant relationship, either positive or negative, between the size of the holdings and the rate of incorporation of the leading innovation of the time, such as the crossbreeding of cattle. The study concluded that landowners of all sizes adopted crossbreeding in the regions where the soils and the rainfall patterns were favourable. Size did not hinder technical progress in capitalist livestock, but the environment did (Travieso, 2019).

I have discussed the notion that agrarian capitalism was born flawed and incomplete. My work presented estimations of the total factor productivity (TFP) of cattle ranching from 1870 to 1914 to show that productivity grew in those years at a much higher rate than the agricultural productivity of countries credited with vibrant agrarian capitalism in the same years, such as the United States, Canada, and Argentina (Moraes, 2008).

Some authors have revisited the idea that, except for some European colonies that have already been mentioned, farming was a weakly and poorly developed activity. New perspectives on the role of the Asociación Rural, an organization created by large landowners in 1874, have shown that farming was a principal concern among the landed class and that the organization managed to be involved in an international network of botanic and agronomic institutions that helped to import new techniques, new plants, and some experts (Beretta, 2008, 2012). A recent study on the mechanization of farming between 1870 and 1930 compared the stock of machines on the farms of the Uruguayan cereal districts with their equivalents in Argentina in the same years. The results showed that Uruguayan farms, despite being smaller than their counterparts, had the same rates of ploughs and reapers per hectare as the most developed farming regions of Argentina. Therefore, taking a regional perspective, Uruguayan farmers were not backward nor uncaptialized, as the classical programme stated (Castro, 2019).

7. SOME PROPOSALS FOR AN OPEN ENDING

The recent works mentioned above signal new lines of inquiry and new methodological directions. Whether these changes indicate the rising of a new Lakatosian programme is something that the future will show. Meanwhile, some guidelines for a new agrarian history arise from the works mentioned above.

1) The new agrarian history analyses agrarian systems. Agrarian systems have human and non-human components that co-evolve in time. The ecosystems are not merely the backdrop for a play performed by humans but are also actors and sometimes play central roles, depending on the researcher's inquiry. Following an intellectual perspective on the relationship between humans and nature that was common sense in those years, the agrarian history of the old programme was prone to overestimate human agency relative to that of nature. Authors often did not examine in enough depth the ways in which farmers and cattle ranchers interacted with the environment, and the environment itself rarely deserved a chapter in their books. The new agrarian history is taking shape with an entirely different mood concerning environmental factors, if only due to the resounding global debates about climate change.

One of the consequences of this perspective is the notion that agrarian systems are marked not on the maps of nations but on the less visible cartography of ecosystems and social relations, which usually cross political boundaries. Therefore, the spatial scope of agrarian history cannot be taken for granted. Instead, it is now a problem that each researcher must solve according to his or her goals and questions.

2) The new agrarian history is interested in the land tenure system, but it is not focused on the *latifundio*, as the classical programme was.

The new agrarian history gathered enough evidence to depart from the old *latifundia*-centric perspective. Contrary to what neo-institutional economics usually repeated about the "colonial legacy" of Spanish America, during colonial times in the Río de la Plata land was much more accessible than it ever was in later periods. The reason was, in the first place, the relative endowments of factors: labour was extremely scarce and expensive, while land was so abundant that it had almost no value until the end of colonial rule. Additionally, institutions did not prevent creole families from accessing land, while they allowed and protected the communal property of the "Indian towns". The first anathemas against land grabbing, as well as the first policies against *latifundia* in Río de la Plata, were dictated in Buenos Aires by the enlightened bureaucrats of the Bourbon era. The liberal institutional matrix imposed in the 19th century after the independence wars in Latin

America, and particularly the new legislation on land established in about the 1850s in most of the countries, imposed a new, modern type of individual property rights as the only entitlement to access land and closed the doors to old ways of exploitation and occupation. After 1850, a new modern land tenure system took shape in all Latin American countries. Individual property rights were redefined on a new doctrinal basis as a “complete and perfect” property. The commons were legally wiped out, and the land that had belonged to Indian towns was privatized. In summary, in Uruguay as in Latin America as a whole, the land tenure system that was at work in the 20th century was not that inherited from colonial times but one that emerged from the liberal, capitalist, and globalized late 19th century.

Secondly, new studies have gathered enough evidence about the land tenure system in colonial times to show that large individual or corporate holdings coexisted with many kinds of rural holdings. In the south-oriented system, where individual property rights prevailed, a peasantry of small plots and herds coexisted with prosperous cattle breeders and with large landlords aiming to export hides. In the north-oriented system, communal property was the keystone of a complete set of practices, agents, and markets. Although coexistence was not always peaceful, Guaraní missionary inhabitants, mercantile breeders, wheat farmers who also milled grain, and even peasant families dedicated to pastoralism and to cropping a vegetables managed to eschew the fate of being purely wage earners.

Finally, the new agrarian history has controverted the idea that the *latifundio* is inherently “backward”. Having settled that there were no feudal tinges or intrinsically archaic landowners, we must restart the conversation on capitalist agriculture on a new basis. It is worth recalling, to begin with, that no economic theory, including classical Marxism, pointed to plot size to explain the nature of social relations in agriculture. What matters, then, is not plot size but the inequality and power within agrarian systems. We need to scrutinize inequality in agrarian systems with new sources, new tools, and new conceptual lenses, focusing less on the size of the plots and more on the size of capital, income, and power.

3) The new Uruguayan agrarian history is no longer the task of historians from one country but the task of a regional community formed by Argentine, Brazilian, and Uruguayan scholars.

The current conditions of internationalization of the profession have created a fruitful framework for academic cooperation among universities in Latin America. Additionally, research on Latin American history has generally cast off its 19th-century nationalist matrix in an effort to leave behind the narrow analytical and geographical boundaries

of each country. Concerning the history of agrarian systems, there is a collective effort from a group of historians from Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, whose principal works I have tried to recall here. An attentive reader of their works will be able to recognize the mutual borrowings, coincidences, and nuances among them. This cross-border network of individuals linked by cooperation and friendship, which has undertaken the collective work of reviewing the past, is also a hallmark of the new agrarian history.

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