

## **Urban modernization and mobility: tram routes in Santiago, Chile, 1857-1934**

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Public transport efficiency is a central issue with regard to the current and future development of cities in Latin America. However, when it comes to detecting problems and planning the necessary changes in transport systems, the economic, social and political forces historically involved in this discussion are often ignored. This PhD research addresses the evolution of one of the most determining means of transportation in the development of the modern city: the tramway. It is especially focused on the importance gained by this vehicle as a socio-technical device amidst certain modernizing flows linked to the first expansion stages of capitalism and the development of urban mobility in Santiago between 1857 and 1934. This time frame was defined according to the first and the last line of rails built in the city. Viewed from a non-chronological perspective, this period represents the shift from muscle-powered (animal traction) to mechanical (electric traction) transportation. This is associated with the transition from a society whose movement is spatially and culturally organized around a slow, cyclical and not yet fully urban notion of time, to one that upholds permanent circulation and fluxes as fundamental for the population's daily life.

The Sylff Research Abroad grant allowed me to deepen the transnational perspective of my research. Although it is a case study, the movement of capital, knowledge and technologies necessary for the development of the tram system in the Chilean capital is related to global and regional processes. My time as guest researcher in the Lateinamerika-Institut (LAI) at Freie Universität Berlin gave me the opportunity to expose my work at an academic institution that gathers professors and graduate students of different nationalities, with whom I could discuss possibilities and contradictions regarding public transport in a context of decentered modernity. Furthermore, the specialized literature review and research on primary sources at the Ibero-Amerikanische Institut Preußischer Kulturbesitz's library (IAI) were valuable contributions to a deeper understanding about the relationship between the Chilean process and those in other urban societies.

### **Urban change and public transport**

Santiago, like most Latin American capitals, went through important changes in its spatial, social and cultural dynamics since the mid-nineteenth century. It went from being a postcolonial city to a large village, and by the very first decades of the twentieth century, it already had the appearance of a sprawling metropolis (Almondoz, 2013). The movement of

goods and people was the basis for multiple programs aimed at rationalizing urban space. The elite's modernizing discourse sought to provide the city with the necessary conditions to take on the symbolic status of the country's political center, overcoming physical and cultural obstacles imposed by space and its use with regard to the productive management of time. The idea was to clear the streets, shorten the distance between primary products distribution and trading points, as well as to increase citizens' accessibility to new service provision centers which now articulated the urban fabric. Within this framework, transportation gained vital importance as it "fulfilled the role of overcoming - as a rebalancing element - the effects of intrinsic spatial disintegration as the city evolves" (Miralles-Guasch, 2002).



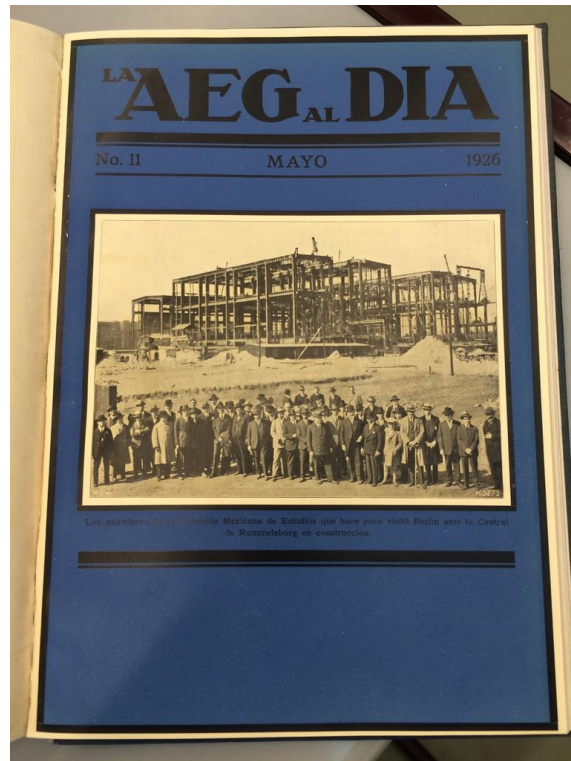
Trams parked in the Plaza Argentina. Santiago, Chile, 1920. Archivo Chilectra.

Early in this process, the local government put Santiago's public transport business in the hands of private entities. Although the municipal government had a role in regulating routes and rates, there was no effective planning policy aimed at linking transport, mobility and urban development in the nineteenth century. Companies, mainly of Chilean capital at that time, replicated a system based on maximizing profits at the expense of precarious service provision. The population's opinion was actively against what it considered inefficient and unsound management of a necessary public good. The tram embodied the limits of socio-spatial modernization, existing between a discourse that saw it as a guardian of positivist values (order, progress and civilization) - which held high the liberal ideology of a nation conceived and developed in an evolutionary and linear perspective - and the daily evidence that highlighted the shortcomings of the city's main public means of transport. This is

verified by various daily news publications, memoirs and literary documents consulted in IAI's library records.

### **The flow of new capitals and technologies: the European godfathers**

The public transport business attracted capital and means of production that affected the type of transport technologies implemented in Santiago. With that in mind, 1897 is a key date: the contract for animal-powered trams expired and electric traction was announced as the next move. Soon, foreign capital came into play to compete for these new transport lines that would cross the city. English, German and Belgian companies were in charge of managing this service during the first half of the twentieth century, gaining control both due to the promises made of improving the public transportation system and for being considered civilizing agents that would take the country closer to modernity. German firms (Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG), Deutsch-Überseeische Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (DÜEG)) are especially relevant because their presence was not limited to the financial sector but were also involved in managing new technological innovations needed to renew public transport. The "informal imperialism" of German capital, which had already been manifested in saltpeter production (Rinke, 1998), now had control of a strategic business area. The main objective was not to profit from the population's need for transport, but to tap into the electricity business, since the implementation of the tramway required production, distribution and trade of electric energy. The European godfathers soon failed in keeping their promises, showing how private interests took advantage of the utopian image of progress on rails. World War I was a key turning point as it led to changes in the global correlation of forces. Local authorities were able to verify the poor conditions of the electric traction tram, a clear expression of the negligence with which predatory capitalism relates to non-industrialized countries, hereby embodied by German companies. The defiant attitude of businessmen and engineers led to moments of tension that paved the way for a discussion about the need for nationalizing passenger transport service in the Chilean capital.



Magazine cover of *La AEG al Día*, 1926. Ibero-Amerikanische Institut Library

My fellowship in Germany, through the Sylff Research Abroad grant, allowed me to review important documents to better understand the foreign policy of companies involved in the development of the Santiago tramway. Although this vehicle is no longer used in Chile, research results can contribute to current discussions about public transport and urban mobility to the extent that they relate back to the origin of tensions between private interests, the role of government and passengers as increasingly important stakeholders.

#### References:

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