



The Shield of the Weak: Feminism and the State in Uruguay, 1903-1933

Christine Ehrick

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This study traces women's political activism and state formation in Uruguay during the first three decades of the twentieth century, highlighting the connections and the dialogues between these two processes.

Prior to the military dictatorship of the 1970s, Uruguay's political and social policies were considered a model for other Latin American countries to emulate. In addition to being an ideal democracy, it formulated the region's most advanced welfare state under José Batlle y Ordóñez, president from 1903-1907 and 1911-1915, and a dominant political figure until his death in 1929. Uruguay had an excellent social security system and became the first Latin American nation to legislate the eight-hour day and guarantee health care to the poor. Women gained access to divorce, higher education, social services, and the vote.

Making use of archival material, personal correspondence, and interviews, Ehrick's study demonstrates that feminism in early twentieth-century Uruguay was local, plural, and partisan. The author reconstructs the genealogy of feminist activism in Uruguay. While feminist ideas may have originated in Europe or North America, they spread quickly to be embraced into a variety of Uruguayan circumstances and traditions, far beyond the middle class elite. Ehrick includes movements that crossed the political spectrum, encompassing working class activists and conservative Catholics as well as middle-class feminists.

The Shield of the Weak is a significant contribution to the discussions about feminism, gender, and the welfare state as well as a useful account of a neglected instance of political reform in South America.

The Shield of the Weak topics include:

Women and Politics in The Model Country

The Nineteenth-Century Roots of Batllismo and Feminismo

State Building and Women's Organizing, 1880s-1915

Gender, Class, and the Politics of Compensation, 1910-1933

Education, Social Assistance, and the State Liberal Feminism, 1916-1932: Class, Party, and Personal Rivalries

The Catholic Ladies' League After Batlle, 1916-1932

Socialists and Communists, 1916-1932

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