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La Crisis de 1930 en Latinoamérica

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Introduction: Towards the centenary of the 1930 crisis. Lessons from Latin America

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue entitled “La crisis de 1930 en Latinoamérica” coordinated by Cecilia T. Lanata-Briones and Martín Cuesta. This special issue, in addition to pre-empting the centenary of the Great Depression, compiles four papers authored by experts in different sub-fields of economic history. These four articles constitute the existing historiographical renewal with respect to previous approaches that have studied the impacts of the crisis. Research on this crisis has had a substantial impact both on economic historiography and in economics throughout the twentieth century. Existing studies so far have followed approaches from different perspectives as well as in relation not only to theoretical frameworks and ideas, but also to the questions that contemporaries asked of the past. Some existing studies prioritised the analysis of macroeconomic and/or financial imbalances, while others observed the systemic problems of international trade and capital flows in different countries; several have focused on changes in economic policies and/or changes in economic cycles/paradigms. This introduction suggests that the four papers of this special issue in more than one sense address the 1930s crisis following an agenda of contemporary questions

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and problems: the impact of the crisis in terms of gender in Uruguay, the problems of the urban transportation system of the City of Buenos Aires, the transformations in rail transportation, and the road system and tourism in the province of Mendoza.

Keywords

Great Depression, Latin America, Economic History

Introducción: Hacia el centenario de la crisis de 1930. Lecciones de América Latina

Resumen

Esta es la presentación del dossier temático denominado “La crisis de 1930 en Latinoamérica”, coordinado por Cecilia T. Lanata-Briones y Martín Cuesta. El interés de este dossier, además de adelantarse al centenario de la Gran Depresión, radica en la selección de cuatro trabajos de reconocidos/as expertos/as en diferentes ramas de la historia económica. Sin lugar a duda, se puede ubicar a estos cuatro trabajos en líneas de renovación historiográfica con respecto a los abordajes anteriores sobre los impactos de la crisis de la década de 1930. La relevancia de los estudios sobre esta crisis en la historiografía económica (y en la economía) del siglo XX fue más que trascendente, con abordajes desde diferentes miradas y enfoques en relación no sólo con marcos teóricos e ideas, sino también por las preguntas que la contemporaneidad realizaba al pasado. Así, algunas perspectivas hacían primar el análisis de los desequilibrios macroeconómicos y/o financieros, así como otras observaban los problemas sistémicos de los flujos comerciales y de capitales (con o sin dependencia), y otras analizaron los cambios en las políticas económicas y de ciclos/paradigmas. La enumeración de las mismas sería demasiado extensa para esta presentación. Sin embargo, basta lo anterior para poder inferir que los cuatro trabajos aquí presentados, en más de un sentido, abordan la crisis de la década de 1930 con una agenda de preguntas y problemas de actualidad: el impacto de la crisis en clave de género en

Uruguay, los problemas del sistema de transporte urbano de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, las transformaciones en el transporte ferroviario, y el sistema vial y el turismo en la provincia de Mendoza.

Palabras clave

Crisis de 1930, Latinoamérica, Historia Económica

The study of the history of global economic crises has regained momentum. Given the long-lasting effects of the Great Recession and with the looming centenary of the 1929 crisis, the Great Depression and its aftermath are once again a focal point of many studies. The historical analogy established between the Great Depression and the Great Recession shaped perceptions of and economic policy response to the events that unfolded after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, among other things because up until the Great Recession, the Great Depression was the most recent full-blown crisis of global scope (Eichengreen 2012) that gave the “death blow” to the first globalisation process (Bértola and Ocampo 2012, 140).

The general as well as historiographical significance of the Great Depression relates to its widespread consequences which have impacted individual and collective consciousness. But as Eichengreen (2012) argues, the economic and social consequences of the Great Depression were even greater. Countries experienced a collapse in output, prices, and international trade; increasing unemployment; and a decline in living standards. The Gold Standard had a crucial role in the transmission and amplification of the Great Depression. Eventually, countries were largely forced off gold in response to balance of payments crises. Eichengreen and Sachs (1985) show that countries that left earlier and devalued more saw greater recovery, though with some differences (Mates Barco 2023). Recent research on 27 countries suggests that leaving gold was essential to replacing expectations of continuing deflation with expectations of stable or increasing prices (Ellison et al 2024).

The Great Depression and its aftermath are a turning point in the history of Latin America. Notwithstanding regional variations, the crisis paved the way for economic, political, and cultural changes (and continuities). There has been substantial research regarding its economic effect and immediate and not so immediate consequences, as this introduction briefly discusses in its first section. However, as times and

context change, researchers ask new questions. The second section of this introduction summarises the content of the four articles that form part of this special issue, which provide an initial set of answers to these novel questions. The last section concludes focusing on topics that can guide further research.

The 1930s crisis in Latin America

The 1930s in Latin America are not only times of economic crisis. Ansaldi (2003) claims that the economic crisis blended with a political one, in the form of a crisis of domination, and a cultural crisis concerning the values of liberalism. The 1930s are a period of economic, political, and cultural changes as well as continuities. For Ansaldi, the economic, political, and cultural changes triggered by the 1929 crisis are so important that they are crucial to understand the region's history up until at least the 1970s. He argues that the changes are not revolutionary, as they do not radically transform the social structure, nor are they so clear cut that imply a substantial political shift from oligarchic domination to populism. The 1930s triggered a decade of violence in the region that included the political protagonism of the armed forces. Political instability and the growing participation of the middle class, workers, and farmers in conflict defines Latin America from then on.

Specifically, the years between the Great Depression and the Second World War constitute a transitional phase in the economic history of Latin America marked by slow economic growth with an annual growth rate of 2.6%, or a per capita rate of just 0.6% (Bértola and Ocampo 2012, 139). The 1930s imply shifts in the trajectory of Latin America's, until then, export-led economies. From then on, the economies experienced state-led industrialisation and the memories of the decade "influenced the region's attitude toward international trade and finance" (Díaz Alejandro 1984, 17). For Bértola and Ocampo (2012, 138) state-led industrialisation in Latin America had three characteristics: the increasing focus on industrialisation as the foundation of development, the considerable expansion of the scope of state action in economic and social affairs, and industrialisation's focus on the domestic market. Neither the export-led model nor particularly the shift that occurred in the 1930s had the same characteristics in all countries, however.

Due to the economic crisis, all Latin American countries experienced a drop in export prices, but the volume decline differed sharply. Bulmer-Thomas (2003, 210) estimates that between 1928 and 1932 the value of exports fell by more than 50% in 11 countries. Despite this decline, the fixed nominal interest rate on public and private foreign debt remained the same. Throughout the region, the responses to the crisis were either wholly improvised or followed what was being done in by industrialised countries. Latin American countries abandoned the Gold Standard, they imposed exchange controls and bilateral payment agreements, they rationed imports, they increased tariffs, and began imposing multiple exchange rates. However, an external imbalance was created by the collapse of earnings from exports and the decline in capital flows. Simultaneously, an internal imbalance surged caused by the decline in government revenue, generating pressure on the countries' fiscal accounts. Starting with Bolivia in 1931, several countries defaulted on their debts partially or completely. In 1935, 97.7% of dollar-denominated bonds issued by Latin American countries (except Argentina) were in default (Bértola and Ocampo 2012, 144). All Latin American countries experienced the negative consequences of the Great Depression. Cuba and Chile, however, given their high degree of openness, the large fall in the price of exports, and the steep decline in the volume of exports, were the countries that suffered the most as their GDPs declined around a 33% between 1928/9 and 1932 (Bulmer-Thomas 2003, 215).

By the end of 1932, external equilibrium had been restored practically everywhere in the region at a much lower level of exports and imports. There is a consensus in the historiography that unlike in industrialised countries, macroeconomic policy in the aftermath of the Great Depression did not support aggregate demand. Rather, it supported the balance of payments given the disequilibria that surged as a consequence of the worsening of the terms of trade and the abrupt decline in capital inflows. In other words, this balance of payments dominance relates to the fact that in the region external shocks from industrialised countries are transmitted via trade and international finance. This aim to restore internal and external equilibrium in the short term, Bulmer-Thomas (2003, 226) argues, permanently affected relative prices. This shift in relative prices was crucial in reallocating resources, becoming a mechanism of recovery from the depression as it was crucial to support industrialisation and import substitution. Moreover, the share of exports

in GDP between 1928 and 1938 declined, in some cases substantially, and all countries except Venezuela experienced a decline in the share of trade in GDP. Bértola and Ocampo (2012, 144) estimate that despite exports recovering later in the decade, in 1937 their purchasing power was 21% below its 1929 level.

Díaz Alejandro's (1984) analysis of the impact that the Great Depression had on the various countries distinguishes between countries that responded proactively, adopting foreign-trade and macroeconomic adjustment measures like currency devaluation and the establishment of tariffs, from those that reacted passively and did not. Díaz Alejandro concludes that the proactive countries achieved a better macroeconomic outcome than the passive ones. For Bértola and Ocampo (2012), while countries like Brazil and Colombia fit Díaz-Alejandro's diagnosis, Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela do not. Along these lines, the compilation edited by Drinot and Knight (2014) finds similar patterns, whilst including Central America in their study.

The Great Depression in Latin America, like elsewhere and like all crises, had long-term effects. Because of the collapse of export prices after 1929, the deterioration in the terms of trade, and the rise in nominal tariffs as well as other ad-hoc policies, the real cost of imports increased, making them more expensive relative to domestically produced goods. Import substitution eased the pressure on the balance of payments, kickstarting a modest increase in domestic demand. The expectation, however, was that exports would rebound from the cyclical recession (Bértola and Ocampo 2012, 148). This rise in industrial output throughout Latin America does not imply that there was no industry before 1930. Thorp (1984) argues that the Depression built on and pushed further existing trends in industrialisation, state intervention, and in the development of financial and other institutions, leading to rapid recovery from the Depression. Based on his analysis of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, Haber (2006) argues that there was substantial industry in the region well before 1930. He provides evidence that for industry to develop since the 1890s, there were policies, such as protective tariffs, that favoured industrialisation. As a consequence of these policies, Haber claims that Latin American governments before and after 1930 were protectionist not because of ambiguous economic goals but because there were political benefits to encouraging manufactures. However, he argues, there are differences in pre and post 1930s Latin American economies

as manufacturing was quantitatively larger in the post 1930 period. Moreover, before 1930 practically all industry was domestically owned. Another important difference is that after 1930 industrialists allied with organised labour, having a common interest in trade protection.

Regarding income distribution and accumulation, FitzGerald argues that even though nominal wages fell in most countries, real wages did not, as the internal shift in relative prices moved against food production, preventing popular living standards from falling. For him, the non-capitalist or small business food sector “acted as a ‘cushion’ in the adjustment process” (FitzGerald 1984, 268). Because of industrialisation and urbanisation, the 1930s in Latin America show concentration of the industrial workforce together with extensive internal migration. Redistribution in favour of the popular class decreased inequality (Frankema 2009).

In their review of the current hegemonic transition period, Bona and Flores Zendejas (2022) examine the role of the changes in world hegemony during the Latin American 1930s and 1980s crises. The authors employ Arrighi and Silver’s (2001) concept of systemic cycles of accumulation (SCA) that identifies a hegemonic nation as driving a period of global capital accumulation. The 1930s were a period of hegemonic transition cementing the definitive decline of Britain as world hegemon and its replacement by the United States. The authors show that the external debt issued by currency towards 1931 by different Latin American countries shifted from being in British pounds to being US American dollars. The hegemonic rise of the United States and the multiplication of its institutional management networks is evident when analysing the creation of some of the central banks in Central and South America that emerged following US American advice. Between 1917 and 1931, US American expert missions to different Latin American countries show the growing weight and incidence of the US strategy considering its expansion of financing in dollars and the weakening of the gold standard. During the 1930s in the region, the United States actively interceded to resolve sovereign debt conflicts via defaults and debt restructuring by coordinating with creditors, governments, and international and national institutions. The United States also promoted economic policies like what they had developed during Roosevelt’s New Deal, which modified the liberal tendencies typical of the financial-expansionary phase of the British SCA. For Bona and Flores Zendejas, the fiscal space opened by this strategy allowed the financing of state-led industrialisation.

The 1930s crisis in Latin America. Novel insights from the south of the Southern Cone

The centenary of the Great Depression is only a few years away. Considering this crucial milestone and the long-lasting effects of this crisis as well as a changing context, several economic historians have been focusing on re-visiting the existing knowledge of the effects of crisis in Latin America and/or exploring new dimensions of it by asking new questions, using novel methodologies, and compiling new sets of data. This special issue brings together some of this research. As such, it provides new insights on the effects of the 1930s crisis on the Argentine transport and tourism sectors and on the trajectory of Uruguayan female labour force participation.

Throughout Latin America, the recovery of the crisis was fuelled by the export as well as the non-export sectors. Within the last one, construction, and transport were crucial. Even though the railway construction boom was over in the region by the 1930s, the road transport system still had growth potential. The state played a key role in financing the construction of roads that used labour and local raw materials. The road system expanded throughout Latin America in the 1930s. There was a particularly impressive increase in Argentina, and this expansion provided an opportunity for absorbing unemployed labour in many rural areas (Bulmer-Thomas 2003). Three of the four articles in this special issue focus on different dimensions of the Argentine transport system, providing novel evidence to these phenomena.

Mario Justo López's article sheds new light on the fate of the railway sector in Argentina, moving away from the idea that its deterioration was mainly due to the decline in traffic flow given the recession and the competition arising from automobile transport. Based on the analysis of the British-owned railway companies Sud, Oeste, Central Argentino, and Pacífico, the author shows that the devaluation of the Argentine peso in relation to the British pound sterling and the exchange controls imposed by the Argentine government had a much more determinant role in the revenues of these companies. Given these controls, the companies had to pay an exceptionally high exchange rate to transform their revenues in Argentine pesos into British currency. This situation implied a substantial change in the government's attitude towards these companies and towards the sector, because until 1930 railway activity had been promoted through

a general tax exemption in exchange for a single tax. This attitude change occurred when the railway sector was due a transformation to reduce costs; integrate different modes of transport; increase the speed, frequency, and comfort of passenger services; and replace technology. For López, the change in transport policy in the 1930s was not a rational choice but a product of the changes in the circumstances since not responding to the companies' complaints was a 'quick fix'.

Given the vacancy within the historiography, Paloma Basyk and Martín Cuesta examine the impact of the 1930 crisis in the urban public passenger transport system (Sistema de Transporte Público Urbano de Pasajeros) of the City of Buenos Aires. Like in other cities in the world, the crisis generated major changes in the urban public passenger transport system. Despite them being more expensive than trams, the authors show that there was an increase in the use of the bus-taxis (taxi-colectivos) given their comfort and travel speed. With the economic crisis, the increase in the price of electric transport—due to increased costs—and the fall in both nominal and real wages generated a shift in the means of transport used in the City of Buenos Aires. An already saturated system, trams lost passengers not just to the underground/subway that had limited coverage but more affordable fares, but also to the buses and to the bus-taxis. The decline in real wages and the higher fares decreased both the revenue in the electrical transport systems as well as the number of passengers. This phenomenon, linked to the fall in employment, generated both winners and losers and discussions concerning the role of the state, the ownership (and control) of companies, and the need for changes particularly in relation to the existing monopolies.

Pablo Bianchi Palomares and Natalia Luis argue that the 1930s were particularly relevant in the consolidation of the province of Mendoza as a tourist destination in the centre-west of Argentina, a phenomenon encouraged by the increase in the number of visitors arriving to the Mendoza mountain area by motorised transport. For the authors, this consolidation was a byproduct of a myriad of actions taken by different actors. The actions combined a discourse that promoted automobile travel, the existence of coaches or long-distance buses, the sale of fuel, and the construction of roads. The public policies implemented by the conservative-democratic provincial governments were crucial for this process. These policies improved land communication routes that connected the province's capital city with suburban and mountain

destinations. For the authors, these measures were not only a way out of the economic crisis. They also contributed to reinforcing ‘the local’ by appealing to a nationalist sentiment, and to generate a more fluent link between the province of Mendoza and other large Argentine population centres, indirectly resulting in greater visibility of the province abroad. Civil associations were crucial to channel demands to the agents of political power, ultimately influencing the improvement of roads, the increase of amenities throughout the routes, and the dissemination of new destinations and practices. These associations brought together the practices of mechanised mobility and of tourism, contributing to the consolidation of the ‘car culture’. Coach companies CITA and CATA encouraged domestic and international tourism, by dedicating human, economic, and financial resources to introducing constant improvements in transport services. These companies not only upgraded the service they provided through real estate and technical improvements. They also channelled resources to the advertising itineraries and ways of experiencing travel practices through magazines, travel guides, and promotional brochures.

Crisis recovery usually implies an increase in women’s paid and unpaid work (Gálvez and Rodríguez 2011). In Uruguay during the last seventy years of the twentieth century, male employment improved quicker than women’s, whose labour working conditions are more precarious and unstable (Camou and Maubrigades 2021). Based on these premises and given increasing state-led industrialisation, Silvana Maubrigades examines how both men and women became part of the Uruguayan industrial sector in the first four decades of the twentieth century and how the crisis triggered by the economic crash of 1929 impacted this process. Maubrigades finds that women replaced men within the workforce, particularly in the textile sector, where female labour force participation increased from 38% in 1923 to 62% in 1937. This ‘added worker effect’ meant that women became more integrated into the Uruguayan labour market, but generally under more precarious working conditions and with lower wages than their male counterparts. The evidence suggests that, although women’s wages relative to men increased at an annual 1%, the persistent gender pay gap of approximately 30% underlines a continued unequal perception of women’s work in Uruguay. For Maubrigades, the increase in women’s labour force participation in those productive activities considered as an extension of domestic activities also reflects a process of feminisation that characterises a segmented labour market. The

Uruguayan case of the 1930s is yet another instance in which economic crises deepen pre-existing conditions of inequality in the labour market concerning not only labour force participation and wages, but also labour regulations and equity policies.

The 1930s crisis in Latin America. Towards where can new research go?

Inequality has been on the recent research agenda. One of the big questions in Latin American economic history asks if the region has always been so unequal, as it is one of the most unequal regions in the world. Looking at both asset and income distribution in a long-run perspective, Frankema (2009), for example, proves that the levels and nature of income inequality have changed significantly since 1870. Despite there being redistribution towards the working class during the 1930s in Latin America, Hora (2014) highlights that what has happened with other social classes, like the middle class, is still unknown. Moreover, the increasing availability of new sources of information as well as more sophisticated econometric techniques will allow for further insights on this issue, which could incorporate a dimension on, for example, the gender pay gap.

Another topic that contemporary researchers are interested in concerns the environment and sustainability. Environmental economic historians have studied the impact of geographic endowments and the impact of environmental shocks on historical and long-run development with the aid, for example of new Geographic Information Systems (GIS) databases (Fenske and Kala 2017). For Latin America, future research along these lines could explore the environmental (and other) impacts of the changes in cash crop production, or other commodities, consequence of the Great Depression and the decline in prices.

There are not many studies on the impact of institutional changes and policies to cope with the crisis, apart from the New Deal in the United States. Future research could focus on changing institutional arrangements concerning taxes, public expenditure, public and international finances, as well as trade instruments, and on how they impacted on a wide range of sectors, for example education, health, transport, and tourism to name a few.

The Great Depression was the “death blow” to the first globalisation process (Bértola and Ocampo 2012, 140), a process that greatly shaped

the newly independent Latin American economies in the late nineteenth century. Hence, one could expect further studies on the effects of the end of this process and the policy debate between it and protectionism.

This is not an exhaustive list, however, and one can expect that new questions, new methods, research techniques, and databases will continue to open up new perspectives on this crisis.

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