



Postal universalization: transformation of the space and time imaginaries in the second half of the 19th century in Argentina

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The postal reform that took place during the second half of the 19th century on Argentinean territory introduced not only the postage stamp, but also other items such as postcards and prepaid letters. The state's task of imposing an administrative rationality on the organization that regulated the intellectual, public and private exchanges of the modern world was marked by the effects and vagaries of the nationalization, centralization and merger of the postal and telegraph administrations.

Argentina's signing of the Berne Postal Convention is regarded as the most important landmark after the implementation of prepaid postage stamps, bringing safe and easy international communication within reach of all the inhabitants of the republic. Nonetheless, Eduardo Olivera, General Director of Posts and Telegraphs from 1874 to 1880, suggested reviewing the change in rates proposed by the Swiss and French administrations at the second Postal Congress in Paris in May 1878. Among Olivera's arguments against making rates universal, the following stand out:

- The country's sparse population and the deserts, where there are no inhabitants able to take advantage of the inexpensive rates;
- The lack of a letter-writing habit in Argentina, with the great majority of the population not making use of the Post by reason of their education and customs.

To back up his arguments, he compared the number of inhabitants per square kilometre in Belgium (183), England (152) and Argentina (1/2); the Congress then approved his request.

This paper attempts to point out some of the features of that centralizing intent of the budding Argentinean state. It was a process not without contradictions, in permanent motion, the product of negotiations which were hardly ever simple, as the protagonists sought to build agreements between countries in the region, driven by longer-term supranational and regional objectives.

Considering that context, a set of documents will be examined which allow us to retrace the multidimensional nature of that debate: technical aspects of the execution of the regulations; the hybrid character (regarding the diplomatic aspect and the circulation of specific postal and telegraphic knowledge) of postal congresses and exchanges of correspondence, which consolidated the UPU's intangible network; the iconographic record of the 11th Universal Postal Congress held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1939, materialized through postal objects and a volume published by Ramón Columba containing portraits of the representatives attending the event; the field booklets of technicians; and documents relating to the postal strike of 1888. These materials show how Argentinean tradition was reconciled with the need to integrate into the global space of the postal territory, as expressed in the official documents and the materialization of this project.

For the Universal Postal Union, conformity to international parameters not only meant gaining visibility by means of the development of South American postal conventions (signed with Uruguay and Paraguay) or the exhibition of equipment and printed materials at both continental and international levels. It also involved understanding how images circulated at an unprecedented rate in catalogues, albums, periodicals, postcards and among stamp collectors, who were very active agents in the exchange of knowledge relating to postal administrations.