1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide some elements for the study of the characteristics and significance of sub-municipal decentralization and popular participation in the context of a left-oriented program of local development. The analysis is empirically grounded in data on the process of participatory urban management of Montevideo, the capital city of Uruguay, between February 1990 and July 1998.

This experience is framed in the context of a profound reorientation of the theoretical and ideological foundations of the global debate on development strategies. During the previous four decades, from the early theorists of modernization to the succeeding neomarxists and contemporary neoliberals, development thinkers and policy-makers had agreed on concentrating on the role of the state and the economic structures for national growth. In the 1990s, the debate is increasingly focusing on the relationship between democracy and development. In this perspective, concepts such as *civil society*, *decentralization*, *social capital*, *synergy* and *citizens' participation* are becoming centerpieces of contemporary developmental discourses.

This trend can be particularly observed in Latin America. In this region, a counter-hegemonic political culture is emerging, associated to successful experiences of participatory and decentralized municipal governance conducted by the Left. Especially with reference to the PT - *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party) in Brazil and the FA - *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front) in Uruguay, local politics are turning to be a privileged space for the Left to experiment with social reforms and 'learning how to govern'. The *new* Latin American Left of the 1990s proposes deepening and radicalizing democracy at the municipal level - fostering *participación popular* - as an end in itself, and not simply as a step toward power at national level.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, while in other parts of the world the Left was dramatically losing terrain, throughout Latin America leftist parties won several elections for strategic local offices. By the mid-1990s, there were progressive mayors in the capital cities of Venezuela, Uruguay and Paraguay and in other important metropolitan areas of Argentina and Brazil. In the 1988 local elections, the Workers Party won control of the municipalities of cities accounting for 40% of the Brazilian economy (Fox, 1995). In Uruguay, the Frente Amplio won the municipal elections of 1989 in Montevideo with 34% of the votes, and repeated this performance in 1994, this time obtaining 44% of the votes.

In spite of the singularities of these different experiences of progressive local government, there would be a set of common strategies in the search of alternatives for local development (cf. Schw"nder, 1997), in response to the deep crisis that shaped the social, economic and cultural features of the regional urban scenario of the 1990s. The outburst of a dual city, marked by the explosion of great inequalities in the access to urban goods and services, the expansion of realities of social violence and the radical restructuring of the urban economy, are common features of the Latin American municipalities inherited by the Left. Vis-à-vis this reality, the progressive political forces explicitly undertake the construction of an
alternative model for local development as an opportunity for challenging the political and cultural hegemony of the neoliberal agenda.

Does this model of participatory and decentralized municipal administration represent a more democratic and efficient pattern of local development? Does the new institutional framework fostered by the Left contribute to the constitution of a more reflexive civil society? What are the long-terms prospects of this model? Is it sustainable? Based on empirical data from the experience of municipal government conducted by the Frente Amplio since 1990 up to date, with general references to the regional and national background, and in relation to the contemporary academic and political debate, these are the fundamental questions this paper will address.

What follows is a preliminary systematization of ideas related to a research project to be carried out within the doctoral program of the Institute of Social Studies (The Hague, The Netherlands). The information utilized for writing this paper comes from five basic sources: (1) a review of the Uruguayan press on the process of decentralization and popular participation in Montevideo between 1990 and 1998; (2) previous investigations and policy documents referred to this process; (3) internal administrative and political documents from the municipality of Montevideo and the Frente Amplio; (4) interviews with social and actors engaged in this process, performed in October 1996 and June-July 1998; and (5) my personal first-hand knowledge and insider perspective, as a researcher and NGO project developer living and working in Montevideo until 1996.

The next section presents an overview of the current debate within the Latin American Left and the conflicting approaches toward civil society and citizens' participation, focusing on the Uruguayan Frente Amplio. Section three discusses the different meanings of democracy in relation to broader ideological and organizational changes being processed by the Left. The fourth section analyzes the popular and participatory identity of the model for local governance proposed by the Frente Amplio in Montevideo of the 1990s. The fifth section explores the impacts of the experience of participatory urban management on the urban environment and the quality of life of the Montevideanos, with particular reference to the process of strategic planning. The sixth and concluding section summarizes the main ideas discussed throughout the paper, contextualizing the case of Montevideo and pointing out some problems and questions for further research.

2. Civil society, citizens' participation and the Left

The emerging features of the Latin American participatory and decentralized model for local development would reflect the decentralization paradigm expressly shared by a broad range of political forces, not only in this region but throughout the world. However, I bear up that this project is actually a reaction against the model proposed by the new Latin American Right. Presently, two parallel decentralization currents collide in Latin America: the neoliberal proposal, supported by mainstream international development agencies and conservative political forces, and the radical democratic proposal, promoted by the political and social Left (Coraggio, 1994). Despite the generalized use of terms such as decentralización, sociedad civil and participación popular in the political and technical discourse of the 1990s, there is a deep contradiction between both proposals. The former subordinates the role of the state to the needs of the market, and only appeals to civil society as a means for reducing the cost of social policies and urban services. The latter aims to redefining the role of the state and
supporting civil society's initiatives as fundamental components of the broader emancipatory project of the Left.

The collapse of the Soviet model, despite its relative irrelevance to Latin America, from either an economic or a political perspective - with the exception of Cuba -, had a great impact on the organizational and ideological structures of almost every leftist party in the region. After the turmoil of the late 1980s, the Latin American Left entered a new era, characterized by the redefinition of the utopia and the thorough revision of the previous political strategies. It was necessary to reinvent not only tomorrow's socialist society: it was needed to reinvent the concept of militancia (political activism) itself. As Portantiero (1992) pointed out, the fall of the Soviet model might be understood as a crisis of the Left which was both global and structural in nature, but not necessarily meaning a catastrophe. The crisis should rather be perceived as the 'founding of a new politics', challenging the Latin American Left to invent a new political culture with new forms of collective action. According to Aricó (1992), Latin America has entered a period of cultural struggle, where it is no longer possible to...

... think of revolution as leading to some ideal goal. Profound reforms can mean revolutionary changes, but we cannot think of revolution as an act that changes reality. Rather we ought to think of it as a process of changing people's mentality. Socialism is thus a counter-cultural force, a force for changing culture, rather than one that seeks particular goals. (:21-22)

The emergence of a new Latin American Left can be observed in the creation of a fresh political discourse as well as a renovated political agenda. Long-standing precepts, particularly those regarding the role of the state as the principal and almost unique force of change, are losing their original meaning. Without underestimating the importance of public agency, the new Left reserves for civil society a greater political role. Even when the state is no longer considered the major agent of change, the political project of the new Left reinforces the role of the government, rather than simply letting the market set the course. In this sense, the new Left does not validate the neoliberal project. On the contrary, it conceives economic and social development as a transformation of the existing relationships between the state, civil society and the market. As suggested by Portantiero:

Faced with the options of either privatizing the state or 'statizing' society, we should support policies that democratize both the state and society, with the understanding that 'de-statizing' does not necessarily mean privatizing. Proposals for a democratic Left should focus on the 'public sphere' and the 'state sphere', as the locus for the autonomous organization of a self-managed or cooperative society, alongside 'purely' state and private forms of property and control. (1992:19)

As a condition for achieving its objectives of socio-economic development, revisiting Gramsci's thought, the new Left proposes the construction of a counter-hegemonic political culture, not bound by the logic of the state or the logic of the market. This means a 'reinvention of democracy', not repudiating its 'formal' or 'bourgeois' nature - as it was customary among the traditional Left - but enhancing and broadening the political, economic and social dimensions of democracy within an integrated emancipatory project. In this sense, in his ambitious and controversial attempt of re-definition of the 'intrigues, dilemmas and promises of the Latin American Left', the Mexican political scientist Jorge Castañeda (1994) argues that:
Municipal democracy should be the centerpiece of the left’s democratic agenda, not so much because the region's problems can be solved at this level but because it tipifies the kind of change that is viable, significant and constitutes a stepping-stone for the future. (:366)

Castañeda traces the current trend of progressive local politics back to the colonial practices of *cabildos abiertos*, and relates its ideological foundations to the positions of the West-European Left toward decentralization and local self-rule. This author rightly asserts that a simple *boom* of municipal governments controlled by the Left is not sufficient *per se* to fulfill deeper social, political and economic reforms. Nevertheless - he argues - it is an inevitable condition for the emergence of a new Latin American Left: more sensitive to the concerns, interests and aspirations of civil society, as well as more prepared to govern.

In the case of Uruguay, the municipal triumph of the Left was achieved during the final stage of the transition from a military right-wing dictatorship (1973-1984) to full democracy. Most of the previous development of the Frente Amplio, since its foundation in 1971 in a context of deep economic and political crisis, had been under authoritarian rule. The original goal of the leftist coalition remained unchanged: uniting all the social and political expressions of the left in order to confront the conservative restructuring of Uruguayan economics and politics in the perspective of a more democratic and socially equitable regime. However, after almost two decades, when the Frente Amplio assumed the municipal government of Montevideo its ideological horizon had shifted in the direction of civil society, as I will show with more detail in following sections. Before engaging in local government, the Uruguayan Left had already become aware of the importance of social participation for the unfolding of its political project, through several left-led experiences of grassroots mobilization.

The Frente Amplio was conceived as a coalition of diverse currents of the Left. The founding document was signed by Marxists parties - PCU, communist; PSU, socialist and other secondary groups -, the Christian Democrats, dissident fractions of the two mainstream parties, intellectuals, labor activists and progressive military figures. Besides being a political coalition, since the beginning the Frente Amplio had a complementary (and frequently contradictory) social movement identity. Its fundamental structure was going to be a decentralized network of *comités de base* spread throughout the country, based on associations of workers, students or neighbors, men and women belonging to a member party or without any political affiliation.

During the early years of the post-authoritarian period the Uruguayan Left played an important role on the reconstruction of civil society. In 1985 the Frente Amplio obtained 33.3% of electoral support in Montevideo, and was short of gaining the municipality by just 15,000 votes. While leading the opposition to neoliberal policies at the national parliament, it supported the mobilization of popular sectors organized in labor unions, housing cooperatives, students' associations, women's groups and human rights organizations. The most important expression of this new type of engagement of civil society in the political debate was the organization of several referenda regarding key issues such as the prosecution of human rights violators during the military dictatorship, the privatization of public enterprises and the reform of the social security system, among other initiatives. Throughout the mid 1980s and 1990s, these campaigns combined the mobilization of 'traditional' organizations like the labor and student movements, and *new social movements* like the cooperative housing movement, women and environmental groups, and
neighborhood organizations created *ad-hoc* to collect signatures for launching each legal initiative.

In 1989, after two failed attempts, the Frente Amplio finally won the municipal elections of Montevideo, obtaining 33.6% of the votes. Simultaneously, the most conservative fraction of the National Party won control of the national government. While the ruling party at the national level presented a program based on a greater role for the market, through further privatization, deregulation, liberalization, and a rigid control of social investment, the program of the Left emphasized on radicalizing democracy, both in social and political terms. The two main objectives in the municipal program of the Left were the following: *

**Efficient municipal administration based on social accountability and political and administrative decentralization.** This would imply a *gobierno de puertas abiertas* (open doors government), with effective transference of power to the grassroots. In the future, the municipal cabinet would meet publicly, facing the neighbors and open to social demands and proposals. It would mean, as well, an absolute transparency in the use of public funds and managerial practices. *

**Prioritizing social investment and promoting greater social justice in the access to urban goods and services.** The aim would be to assure equal accessibility to the 'right to the city' to all the social sectors living and working in Montevideo. In practical terms, it would require to combine municipal investment in social programs and urbanistic interventions in public spaces (some of them in well-off areas) open to all the population. Moreover, it would mean a strong policy of public-private partnership between the local governments and NGOs, CBOs and even the for-profit sector.

3. A greater valorization of democracy

The emergence of a 'new' Latin American Left is closely related to a reconceptualization of democracy. The approaches of practically all the foregoing leftist currents of the region toward the question of democracy, up until the middle 1970, had been - to say the least - ambiguous and contradictory. The fact that the concept of modern democracy had been originated under the scope of liberal values, associated to the rise of the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois revolutions, was considered an evidence of its class identity. Under the hegemonic influence of the Marxist tradition (or, in more accurate terms, traditions), this circumstance would pose a 'natural' contradiction to the realization of the interests of the proletariat. As result of this ideological assumption, until recently most Latin American leftist parties did not perceive the questions of individual liberties, political pluralism and the rotation in power as central points of their programmatic platforms.

Pedro Pontual (1995), a Brazilian animator of the *Red Latinoamericana de Poder Local* ('Latin American Local Power Network': a regional coordination of NGOs and social scientists looking for alternatives for participatory local development) proposes the construction of 'a *democratic pedagogy of power* based on two fundamental concepts: *cidadania ativa* (active citizenship) and *democracia integral* (integral democracy). An active citizenship implies not only a citizen with rights and duties, but a creator of rights in the process of construction of new spaces for political participation. I found this notion related to the concept of *reflexive citizenry* suggested by Anthony Giddens (1995) with reference to a self-conscious civil society actively engaged in the democratization of political and economic realities. Within this
conception, democracy acquires a new meaning, affirming as a compulsory condition citizens' participation and a radical transformation of the existing relationship between the state and civil society. In the words of the Argentine scholar Elisabeth Jelin (1993), it means the reinvention of democracy as everyday life, constructing citizenship 'from below'.

The proposal for an active citizenship refers to a necessary radicalization and deepening of democracy, extending the scope of this concept to the framework of economic, social, political and cultural relationships existing within contemporary societies. Brazilian scholars and social activists Marco Arruda and Leonardo Boff (1994) propose a comprehensive definition for the notion of *integral democracy*. This idea refers to a political project that would guarantee to all and each citizens an opportunity for active and creative participation in every sphere of power and knowledge of society: from the village and neighborhood level up to larger production units and the national state.

Arruda and Boff's project hints at another feature of democracy with a conflictive history within previous developments of the Latin American Left: the idea of representation. The proposal for direct democracy had been traditionally advocated by the Left as opposed to the 'bourgeois' and restrictive notion of representative democracy. From this standpoint, other forms of expression of the interests and aspirations of the people, such as plebiscites, referendums and direct community engagement in decision-making through popular assemblies, should have priority over the 'flawed' and 'manipulated' appointment of national or municipal authorities by vote.

Besides the allegedly 'limited' nature of elections per se, the Left rejected objective and long-existing practices of manipulation of the popular will through clientelism, control of the media, or more open maneuvers of electoral fraud as it was common in Latin American countries.[4] At present, as the limitations and flaws denounced by the Left tend to disappear as elections become fairer and less restrictive, new arguments are developed in defense of direct democracy, in the sense suggested by Pontual, Arruda and Boff.

From a European perspective the previous arguments may sound as superficial phraseology without serious meaning. Nevertheless, when referring the debate on the meanings, scope and dimensions of democracy to the particular reality of the Latin American Southern Cone - after two decades of brutal dictatorships and a decade of democratization in the context of a neoliberal paradigm resulting in further social segregation and political fragmentation[5] - the efforts of the Left reconceptualizing democracy acquire a much deeper signification. Besides, it is not only a matter of ideological or theoretical debate: the concepts are developed upon objective social practices, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the coming sections.

4. Decentralization and citizens' participation in Montevideo

One of the main components of the emerging model of municipal rule proposed by the Left is the construction of a new civic consciousness or, in more concrete terms, a new sense of citizenship. In the process of transformation of the local milieu, the different dimensions of citizenship - rights, duties and social responsibilities - acquire new meanings. The consolidation of the model proposed by the new Latin American Left would imply a daily process of civic engagement, leading to a symbolic reinvention of democracy at the local level (cf. Baierle, 1998 and Dagnino, 1998).
Moreover, considering the gravity of the social marginalization of large portions of the Latin American population, the deterioration of the urban environment and the failure of previous strategies of local development, the Left cannot limit its proposal to only political changes. In any case, a participatory and decentralized municipal governance does not necessarily mean lesser efficiency in terms of economic development. As Jordi Borja (1996) asserts recalling the case of Barcelona, some of the cities more prosperous in our times are precisely those that consolidated institutional assurances for citizens' participation. Referring to the specific process of decentralized municipal governance in 1990s Montevideo, Peter Winn (1995) points out that:

Decentralization was a leftist response to neoliberalism in that it assured both liberty and equality. Its aim was not only to make government more responsive, but to transform the exercise of power and the management of daily life, creating a new democratic style of local government in which consultation from below replaced centralized authoritarian decision-making from above. Implicit was the political goal of turning passive citizens, whose political participation was limited to their obligatory vote every five years, into active protagonists with growing power over the decisions that affect their daily lives, from the location of services and the use of parks, to the planning of public investment and local development. (:24)

As I already indicated in previous pages, the experience of Montevideo is immersed in a broader trend of changes fostered by others leftist parties of the region. Mirjam Zaaijer (1995), analyzing the experience closer to Montevideo both in geographic and political terms, Porto Alegre's experience of orçamento participativo (participatory budgeting) under the government of the Workers' Party, distinguishes three corresponding elements:

Firstly, its incremental approach of building political commitment and capacity to act, is a sound cornerstone of the economic policy being developed. Secondly, the approach is based on strategic thinking on the city's future. (...) Thirdly, stimulating local development is not viewed as an exclusive local government concern, but as a matter of fostering alliances with various public and private parties. (:4-5)

The will to modify the power structure of society, at least at the city level, is a common characteristic of these two Latin American processes. In both cases, local governments face the challenge of attempting a double road for local development. Firstly, they must accomplish what voters traditionally expected from the municipality: to be effective and efficient in the extension of urban services, and in the administration of financial resources. Secondly, fulfilling the greater venture of transforming the hegemonic system of decision-making and resource-allocation for local development.\[6\]

This municipal utopia ranges from making city finances and budgeting more public and accountable, to promoting active community participation in civil society-led planning and management of long-range programs of local development. In the case of Porto Alegre, the Workers' Party is emphasizing on the so-called orçamento participativo (Navarro, 1998). In the case of Montevideo, the Frente Amplio is stressing the creation of a decentralized system of popular participation through a city-wide network of neighborhood councils that enables democratic local governance at the district level. The concept of synergy is also very important in these processes, since in both cases representative political, economic and social agents - from the city chamber of commercial entrepreneurs to sports clubs, NGOs, women's organizations, labor unions and urban social movements - are integrated to the
process of rethinking and rebuilding the common urban environment. The explicit goals are the radicalization or deepening of democracy and a more sustainable and equitable locally based economic development.

The process of municipal decentralization and grassroots democracy started in Montevideo in March 1990, when the city mayor launched the CCZs, Centros Comunales Zonales (Zonal Communal Centers). This measure meant a radical shift in the model historically applied for managing Uruguayan cities. The creation of eighteen CCZs was intended to reverse the prospects and priorities of the municipality: in the future, the vecinos (neighbors), and not the politicians and bureaucrats of the city hall would be the real policy-makers. This process - after frequent clashes with the national parliament, controlled by a coalition of two right-wing parties, and a strong opposition of the wealthy real estate holders - was institutionalized in 1993, when the Junta Departamental (municipal council) passed a decree setting the current municipal decentralized political and administrative structure. The model has three complementary dimensions: (1) An administrative decentralization, meaning the spatial deconcentration of municipal management and services, from the municipal central offices to the neighborhoods (to the CCZs). (2) A social decentralization, establishing the direct participation of citizens in municipal government, at different levels: proposing and promoting grassroots initiatives, self-management and co-operation with municipal agencies in neighborhood affairs, and evaluating and monitoring city-wide municipal policies. (3) A political decentralization, transferring decision-making responsibilities from the central municipal bodies to the districtal bodies. The subsequent institutional framework, following the guidelines proposed by the neighbors themselves in Montevideo en Foro - a forum organized by the municipality in 1992 with the assistance of local NGOs - would be based on three autonomous structures existing in each of the sub-municipal districts, as shown by Figure 1. (i) An administrative structure, being the Centro Comunal Zonal itself, managed by administrative, services and technical staff. (ii) A social structure, with a Concejo Vecinal (Neighborhood Council) composed of representatives (from twenty-five to forty, according to the reality of each district) of local grassroots organizations, appointed for a period of two years in open elections. (iii) A political structure, consisting of a Junta Local (Local Board) composed of five district representatives nominated by the parties represented in the National Parliament: three appointed by the ruling party in the municipality and two by the opposition. 

At a city-wide level, and according to the National Constitution, the executive branch of the municipal government is composed of the Intendente Municipal (Mayor) and his/her advisors, a General Secretariat (with administrative functions), seven Departments and eighteen Divisions. The legislative branch is the Junta Departamental (Municipal Council), composed of sixteen legislators from the ruling party and fifteen representatives from other parties.

This institutional framework was finally set up after the elections of the members of the neighborhood councils, in 1993 and 1995. With 14.000 more voters than in 1993, the latter did not satisfy the more optimistic previsions, but the municipal officers in charge of this program still evaluated it as a positive step toward deeper decentralization and participation. In 1993, the rather flexible electoral process had lasted for forty-five days, with a total outcome of 68.000 votes (7% of Montevideo's citizenry). In 1995 there were 82.000 votes (9%), within a much shorter (only one day) and formal process (supervised by the National Electoral Court).
Looking at the electoral figures, it is not possible to suggest any correlation between the social identity of each neighborhood and the level of participation. Some working-class districts (CCZs 9 and 10) doubled the number of votes of 1993, but similar rates were registered in upper-class districts (CCZ 5, and particularly in Punta Carretas, a pretty exclusive upper-income quarter). On the contrary, in the western zone, characterized by a strong and long-lasting tradition of community and labor organization, no progress was achieved. The most unexpected result came from El Cerro - a symbolic quarter, focal point of labor and political activism in the city throughout this century - where the number of votes effectively declined between 1993 and 1995. One of the members of the Local Board of El Cerro relates this fall with the 'little response received from the municipality regarding public works, that is what people appreciate. Social projects such as health, where the effort has been intense, are not perceived by the neighbors in the same way'. This edil adds that there was a certain 'idealization and expectations generated by the first councils, that later did not work close enough to the neighbors to explain their roles and objectives' (quoted by Zibechi, 1995; my translation).

According to the original political program, the participatory character of this experience should not be confined to the elections of representatives. The primary design of the process of decentralization had anticipated the direct engagement of the community in local governance. Besides the elected concejeros, many other vecinos - some of them members of existing community-based organizations and other just 'neighbors' - were supposed to take part in the process, joining ad-hoc work committees at the CCZs. Ranging from health and cultural projects, to the allocation of land and building materials, the neighbors would have an active participation in decision-making. In practice, the opening of the councils to the broader participation of neighbors did not work as expected in every neighborhood. In some CCZ it resulted in a 'delegative dynamics' (Zibechi, 1995) that dried-out the original initiative.

Nevertheless, the overall impact of the process is positive. The preparation of the current municipal five-year plan and budget, passed by the city legislative body in 1995, was preceded by a year-long discussion in each of the eighteen districts. With an enthusiastic participation of municipal social workers and NGOs in the preparation of workshops, seminars and participatory action research projects, the neighbors were capable of elaborating proposals and setting priorities for the implementation of municipal social policies and the extension of urban services.

The latest major activity of the municipal program of decentralization took place between August and October of 1996. Organized by the municipality and instrumented by local NGOs, Montevideo en Foro II, the second city-wide debate, was aimed to evaluate the unfolding of the decentralization process and impulse corrections. The proceedings of this debate reflect a growing concern about some possible flaws of this process, related to the efficiency of the decentralized bureaucracy in the implementation of social policies, the 'social control' of the municipal intervention on the urban space, and the (relative lack of) independence of the social structure (Neighborhood Councils) from political parties, among other worries. Similar issues were identified as components of the Brazilian debate on municipal decentralization (see Alvarez, 1993, Aber, 1996, and Baierle, 1998).

In spite of possible flaws in the road toward decentralization and popular participation, the general perception of this process among the Montevideanos is altogether positive. The most clear difference between the reality of urban management before 1990 and the present
situation is that in the previous model the decisions were taken by a limited number of bureaucrats and politicians. Nowadays there are several hundreds of ordinary men and women - with or without technical and/or political background - collecting information, arguing with the municipal agencies about the best use of the resources in each neighborhood, proposing alternatives, demanding and supervising the overall development of the five-year plan, and designing the city of tomorrow. Decentralization and popular participation can have a real impact in the urban environment and in the quality of life of the city dwellers, as I will try to demonstrate in the following section.


According to the last national census (1995), the city of Montevideo has 1.300.000 inhabitants, representing 44% of the total population of the country. Considering the extent of the metropolitan area, including sub-urban locations in the neighboring departamentos (provinces) of Canelones and San Jose, this figure rises to approximately 1.600.000. Since its origin, as the main port of the Southern Atlantic during colonial times, this city has been the political, economic and cultural capital of the country. After a long process of decay under the rising importance of competing cities in the region -Buenos Aires and Rosario in Argentina, and Porto Alegre and Sao Paulo in Brazil - Montevideo is gradually recovering its geo-political signification as the would-be 'Brussels of the South'. By the end of this century, Montevideo will be the administrative and political capital of the MERCOSUR: the world's fourth largest trading block after the EU, NAFTA and the emerging APEC.

The socio-economic landscape of Montevideo in 1990, when the Frente Amplio assumed the municipal government, could be portrayed as a situation of extensive impoverishment and deepening of social inequity. After almost two decades of political authoritarianism and economic neoliberalism, Montevideo was becoming a dual city, with an upper-income coastal line exhibiting social indicators and services equivalent to Northern standards, and with an ever-increasing belt of squatter settlements, the so-called cantegriles, lacking the most basic social services and urban infrastructure. The middle-class society constructed during the Batllista times was rapidly falling apart.

By the late 1980s Montevideo was amid a process of grave urban decay. Twelve years of dictatorship had marked the transition - in words of Mariano Arana, the present mayor - "from the creative liberty to the repressive city"(1997:5). Thousands of families had been displaced from the central areas to the periphery, while the urban heritage of the inner city was systematically tramped down. National policies that favored real state speculation and the liberalization of the housing market contributed to the emergence of a city increasingly segregated in social, cultural and spatial terms.

The Frente Amplio is at present the political force truly defending the Batllista welfare-state legacy (Winn (1995), reinventing local government through the decentralization of municipal services and the promotion of popular participation. As it is explicitly acknowledged by the Frente Amplio, the instrument for 'reinventing local government' is the elaboration and implementation of the Plan Estrategico de Montevideo (Strategic Plan). This is conceived as:

A permanent and participatory process involving the three basic pillars of municipal management: the community (los vecinos), the workers and the local government. It is an instrument that, based on strategic guidelines, enables a systematic effort for organizing and
managing the city, understood as a dynamic system of relations between human activities and the physical environment, aimed toward a more equilibrated, just and harmonic model of government. (*Unidad Central de Planificacion*, 1994; my translation).

Unlike traditional planning methods that rely on a rigid prognosis of trends, strategic planning implies expecting new trends, discontinuities and unexpected realities. From the perspective of the new generation of urban planners at the core of the 1990s municipal staff of Montevideo, strategic planning is the more appropriate mechanism for decision-making, since it would fulfill three main conditions (Altmark and Hegoburu, 1994): (a) Facilitating agreements between the municipality and others social, political and economic actors before implementing city-wide or district projects. (b) Allowing higher levels of community participation and communication in the planning and management of projects. (c) Enabling a more efficient implementation of the projects.

In other words, the methodology of strategic planning would facilitate to plan and implement multiple actions at various levels, sectorial projects, zonal projects and city-wide programs, short-range and long-term proposals, according to the unfolding of consensus at each level. In order to make the strategic plan function and have an impact, decentralization becomes an unavoidable contingency.

The overall execution of the strategic plan is responsibility of a special technical division within the municipal administration: the UCP - *Unidad Central de Planificación* (Central Planning Unit). The UCP is a multidisciplinary working committee, composed by urban planners, architects, economists, lawyers and social scientists, supported by administrative and technical staff in the areas of statistics and computers engineering. However, the basis of the strategic plan are (or should be) the decentralized bodies of local government - CCZs, Neighborhood Councils and Local Boards - which assume different but complimentary responsibilities in the diverse phases of data-gathering, decision-making and final implementation of the projects.

This new form of decentralized and participatory planning and management (strategic planning) is proving to be more democratic and efficient. Based on a permanent interaction between the UCP and the decentralized bodies, the plan is already being implemented. The main provisional results per strategic guideline are the following:

**Land management:** In spite of a low demographic pressure - the average annual growth rate is only 0.6% - Montevideo was experiencing a process of urban growth characterized by a steady pattern of socio-spatial segregation. The deterioration of the national economy was causing the decay of the inner city as the low-income population was being forced to move to the periphery in search of affordable housing. This situation was manifested in the expansion of squatter settlements in the outskirts of the city and in abandoned dwellings of the central areas. As result, the quality of life of the urban population and the environmental standards of the city were falling. In compliance with the strategic guidelines, and after a thorough analysis of the availability of land and discussions with the Neighborhood Councils and CBOs working in the field of housing rights, over 160 hectares of suitable urban land were distributed to *cooperativas de ayuda mutua* (sweat-equity, mutual-aid cooperatives), enabling the construction of approximately 3,000 new dwellings for low-income households. At the same time, negotiations are being held with the National Ministry of Housing and other central agencies in order to regularize and relocate all the remaining squatters settlements.
**Infrastructure and basic services:** Unlike most Latin American cities, Montevideo had an early development of urban infrastructure, partly dating from the 19th century. It was the first city in the continent to build a sewage network, covering at present 60% of the urban area and 80% of the population. The main problems were maintenance and the lack of recent expansions. Since 1960 there had been no major investment in the sewage system, and several segments of the network were choked. After a city-wide debate engaging the Neighborhood Councils, it was proposed to include sewage among the priorities of the five-year budget approved in 1996 - when the second term of the Frente Amplio in municipal office started -, resulting in new investments in sewage that will benefit around 100,000 persons (mainly low-income population) and new methods for maintenance involving the community.

**Urban circulation:** Contemporary changes in the occupational structure of the urban population, the concentration of economic activities in downtown areas during rush hours, previous errors in the location of industrial plants and the sudden rise in the number of vehicles circulating in the city, are some of the factors contributing to the growing congestion of the streets of Montevideo. Municipal initiatives introduced over the past eight years are bringing partial solutions to the problems of urban circulation, including vial education campaigns for drivers and pedestrians and more traffic lights. The most important project is aimed at discouraging the use of private cars through higher parking fees in the central districts. The municipality also facilitated access to credit to private companies for the renewal of the fleet of urban buses and tightened controls on the quality of services. Nonetheless, the public transport - entirely in the hands of the commercial sector - is still highly deficient, and the parking fees are a reason for continuous social and political dispute. Furthermore, municipal traffic authorities have not seriously considered some environmentally friendly proposals supported by NGOs and CBOs, based on the establishment of ciclovías (cycle paths).

**Local economic development:** Montevideo concentrates 53% of the industrial units of the country and 73% of the industrial labor force. Historically, industry has played a central role in the positioning of the city in relation to the rest of the country, the region and the global context. It also has been a basic source of employment, and subsequently a key factor in the structuring of the urban space, since working-class neighborhoods were built around the factories. At present, the existence of industrial plants within residential areas aggravates the environmental problems of the city. Moreover, the ongoing process of deindustrialization resulting from the shifts of the national economy toward greater liberalization and lesser state support, generates further uncertainties around the use of the industrial infrastructure and spaces. These are problems being discussed at the level of the Neighborhood Councils, although the possible solutions exceeds the capacity of intervention of the municipal government. Moreover, based on requests presented by the grassroots, the local government has initiated a round of contacts with national ministries, the University and the entrepreneurial chambers orientated to facilitate industrial restructuring according to more appropriate criteria for land and environmental management.

With reference to the commercial activity, an influential element addressed by the strategic plan is the emergence of a network of shopping malls throughout the city, with negative effects on small-scale retailing activities. These American-style shopping centers debilitates the traditional centrality of the inner city and reinforces the tendency toward socio-spatial segregation through the modification of the patterns of domestic consumption. Moreover, the growth of the informal economy - particularly street-selling -, associated to higher indexes of
unemployment and poverty, modifies the urban landscape and originates new political and social tensions. The settlement found by the local government regarding informalization was in line with the proposal of decentralization and popular participation - or as Winn puts it, 'stressing the mediating role of the State while promoting the organization of civil society' (1995:21). After negotiations with the vendors and consultations with the CCZs of the inner cities, the municipality regularized their activities and reserved certain market places for the informal sector in downtown areas.

**Environmental quality:** The location of Montevideo on the coast of the Rio de la Plata estuary should ensure access to good-quality natural resources, but currently the environment is suffering the pressure of improper use, delays in the extension of basic infrastructure and the displacement of impoverished population to the urban periphery. The sustainability of the city is also threatened by public housing programs built by the National Ministry of Housing without taking into account their probable environmental impacts. Nevertheless, unlike other Latin American cities such as Sao Paulo, Santiago de Chile and Mexico D.F., the environmental problems of Montevideo are not irreversible. The main concerns are related to the accumulation of solid waste, the contamination of urban water courses and beaches by sewage and industrial emissions, and the increase of air pollution due to the rise of the number of automobiles in the city. In response to these problems, the municipality has promoted several projects aimed to preserve and improve the environmental quality of Montevideo. Among others: the recuperation of the beaches on the Rio de la Plata after the construction of a sub-aquatic sewage system, tighter controls over industrial emissions, and the already mentioned measures of discouragement of the use of private cars (higher parking fees). Other projects are planned to begin in the coming months: the recuperation of the Miguelete and Pantanoso creeks, a new system of classification and recycling of domestic garbage and, as a condition for the success of the previous initiatives, a city-wide campaign of environmental education to be carried out in and by each one of the CCZs.

**Social welfare:** The Montevideanos' access to basic needs and opportunities for social development are strongly related to the evolution of the national economy. After two decades of neoliberalism, in spite of the growth of the national GDP, social indicators have not improved at the same rate. The decline of the Uruguayan welfare state can be appreciated in Montevideo, where almost 50% of the population live: it is manifested in the indexes of rising unemployment and the informal sector and in the modification of the patterns of work and consumption. The capacity of intervention from the local government is limited, since constitutionally most social policies - particularly social security, education, housing and health - are responsibility of the national government. Nevertheless, contradicting the traditional role of the Uruguayan municipalities, since 1990 the local government is implementing autonomous social programs, without funding or political control from the national government. The main projects deal with the generation of employment opportunities for women and youngsters, granting development agreements executed by local NGOs and CBOs, particularly in the framework of the CCZs. The municipality also runs decentralized projects benefitting children (kindergarten and primary health facilities), the disabled and senior citizens.

**Cultural development:** Montevideo has always been the cultural capital of the country, not only in terms of artistic culture, but also with reference to education, popular culture, recreation and sports. The cultural profile of the Uruguays, and specifically of the
Montevideanos, is the synthesis of diverse traditions developed by the descendants of Spanish settlers, European immigrants and African slaves over two centuries.\[15\] During the last three decades the investment of the public sector in education and cultural activities has been diminishing, threatening the current position of the country in the international context.\[16\] Even though education and culture are primarily responsibilities of the national government, since 1990 the municipality of Montevideo has initiated diverse programs of cultural development, promoting agreements with NGOs, research centers and the National University. Among other projects: recuperation of municipal theaters and zoos, literature and fine arts contests, an annual festival of 'young theater', special grants to cultural organizations - principally in relation to candombe, murga and tango, the three musical styles at the core of Montevideo's cultural identity - and pilot projects aimed to the recuperation of the architectonic heritage of the city.

**Municipal managerial capacity:** Concentrating almost half of the national population, the municipality of Montevideo is a primary actor in Uruguay's political and institutional scenario. Internally, the institutional capacity of the municipal government has not always been coherent with its signification in national politics. During the past seven years, additional difficulties have emerged in relation to profound political differences between the municipal and the local governments, hindering the potential for coordination on public interventions affecting the city and its residents. In response to these problems, the Frente Amplio administration has attempted to modernize the organizational structure and management style of the municipality, basically around the introduction of decentralized structures. In association to the process of decentralization, other changes have been promoted, looking for a greater efficiency and rationalization of the services provided by the local government, both at the city and at the district levels. The most important initiative in this direction has been the reorganization of municipal workers around the decentralized structures, requiring further training and changes in the management of personnel, equipment and infrastructure.

The main constraint for the introduction of further changes has been the limited availability of resources. In spite of the financial autonomy granted by the Uruguayan Constitution, the municipal attempt to update the catastro (real property census) in 1991 was blocked by the ruling right-wing coalition in the national parliament, alleging the supposed unconstitutionality of this project. The new property census would have allowed a significant increase in municipal revenues, levying new tax assessments on the real estates of upper-income areas.\[17\] Unlike all the other Uruguayan municipalities, Montevideo has to rely on own resources. Before the Frente Amplio assumed local government, there were constant financial transfers from the national government to the city hall. At present, there are no national subsidies for public works (namely, upgrading the sewage system) that previously were financed by the Uruguayan state. The left-led government of Montevideo is also discriminated in relation to social security payments, being the only municipality required to cover the fiscal contributions of municipal workers.

**Citizens' participation and local governance:** Since 1990 the city (or, in more precise terms, the departamento) of Montevideo has been decentralized for political and administrative purposes in eighteen districts (see Figure 2), according to the organizational structure presented earlier in section 4. In 1993 the CCZs were declared Servicios Municipales (Municipal Divisions), completing a long and difficult process of negotiations between the Frente Amplio and the opposition.
Figure 2. Administrative and political organization of Montevideo in Zonal Communal Centers

After the debate unfolded in 1996 during Montevideo en Foro II, all the components of the municipal government agreed to impulse a series of corrections to the existing structure of decentralization. Among the priorities for the coming period are: improving the channels of information and communication between the decentralized bodies and the city hall; providing further and technical support to the Local Boards and the Neighborhood Councils, continuing the reorientation of staff from the municipal headquarters to the CCZs, and granting further financial and operational autonomy to the districts.

Public-private partnership: Breaking long-standing prejudices within the Latin American Left, the Uruguayan Frente Amplio is building a new set of cooperative relations between the municipality and the private sector. Positive experiences of public-private partnership have been undertaken in relation to upkeeping and maintenance of public spaces, primary health services, kindergarten education, management of sport and recreational facilities and administration of the municipal agricultural market. In most of the cases these experiences are being carried-out through contracts with local entrepreneurs, NGOs or CBOs, in the framework of the CCZs. The results have been greater efficiency in the provision of services and the liberation of municipal resources that can be applied in areas where the private investment is generally low, enabling a sounder urban management without adding pressures over the municipal budget.

All these guidelines are closely related to the most recent and ambitious project realized by the Central Planning Unit: the so-called Plan Montevideo, or in more precise terms Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial 1998-2005. This is an urban development plan for the coming decade, aimed at facilitating the management and expansion of the city according to the general objectives of the aforementioned Strategic Plan. This proposal, executed by a joint team of architects and urban planners from the municipality and the National University, aims at setting general rules for the sustainable use of natural resources and existing infrastructures and services. It also regulates the future expansion of the city in order to maintain and/or upgrade the wellbeing of the Montevideanos, establishing a set of flexible economic, demographic, social, cultural and ecological conditions to be followed by the diverse social and economic actors involved in the urban process. This plan will be the normative reference for the formulation of succeeding five-year municipal budgets and the intervention of other non-municipal public agencies and private developers over the urban space.

For the conception of this plan, the technical planning unit consulted a broad range of social, economic and political actors: the decentralized municipal structures, grassroots organizations, professional associations, political parties and business chambers. Nevertheless, once the plan reached the municipal council for its official approval, the right-wing opposition and conservative commercial associations, arguing legal and technical flaws, tried to blockade it in the same way that they have done with previous municipal projects during the current leftist administration. At this moment, the plan has gone back to the Central Planning Unit. The municipal government has agreed to negotiate some modifications with the opposition, in order to assure the final approval of the plan by the municipal council, and achieving a broader social and political support.
6. Concluding remarks

One of the main lessons associated to the latest current of municipal decentralization in the Southern Cone of Latin America, after the experiences of leftist parties in local governments for the first time in the regional history, is that the generation of a political consensus over decentralization may be insufficient. Governance necessarily implies that local elected authorities are both representative in political terms and efficient in the administration and management of municipal resources and services.

For the Latin American Left itself, the experience of municipal office can be a source of valuable lessons: it shows that social and political change cannot be the outcome of an abrupt turnover of the foregoing political order. Decentralization is invariably a process: a gradual and dynamic progression toward the fulfillment of the original goals. However, legitimacy can only be built up on concrete results of transformation of previous realities. As pointed out by Velázquez (1994), the process of decentralization must be effective in achieving higher levels of governance, in the production of better living standards, in the improvement of public services, in the professionalization of management, in the eradication of clientelism, and in the approximation of government and civil society. Otherwise, it loses the confidence of the citizenry and fails in its goal of reinventing local government.

From a political perspective, decentralization can be understood as a response to the growing tensions and social conflicts produced by the inability of the state (in the broader sense) to satisfy the demands of society. Decentralization becomes the search of appropriate institutional mechanisms aimed to a greater participation of the citizenry in public affairs, a wider and stronger link between the state and civil society, and a way to solve social problems close to where they exist. However, in practice there is nothing such as a mechanic relationship between decentralization and democracy. As I attempted to show in this paper, there are several indicators of a close connection between decentralization and democracy, but this does not implies the existence of a necessary relation. An experience from another Southern Cone country, Chile during the 1990s, provides a clear example of an administrative political reform based on decentralization within a dictatorial environment. The Chilean case of decentralization demonstrated that the transfers of attributions and responsibilities to local administrations is not necessarily a sign of democratization.

In relation to the cleavage decentralization - democracy, the realization of democratic elections at the national level is a necessary condition for decentralizing municipal structures. Both in the cases of participatory and decentralized local governance in Uruguay and Brazil, these experiences developed after a long process of transition from right-wing dictatorships to democratic rule. Winn (1995), quoting the words of Manuel Laguarda, one of Uruguay's leading socialist ideologists, highlights three factors in the development of the process of decentralization in Montevideo: (1) The experience of twelve years of intolerance under dictatorship (1973-1985), leading to a reassessment of the values of pluralist democracy. (2) The discrediting of the soviet model of 'state socialism', leading to a reconceptualization of political change as orientated toward a 'socialist civil society and a societal socialism'. (3) The discovery of social movements, from women's groups to neighborhood associations, as a new form of 'popular power'.

However, beyond the ideological construction of decentralization as an ideal path toward democracy, after reviewing the concrete experience of Montevideo it is clear that
decentralization does not democratize in itself. Deeper socio-political changes must be accomplished in order to secure that decentralization lead to a real democratization of municipal government. The setting of a concrete institutional framework - namely, popular election of representatives to the Neighborhood Councils and Local Boards - is not enough. Democratic structures and practices at the district level, and equitable relations among the social and political actors involved - municipal officers, political parties, NGOs, CBOs and ordinary vecinos - are required as well.

In the particular case of Montevideo, the process of decentralization is also the expression of two conflicting structures of municipal administration. The first structure is the new decentralized framework, after the creation of eighteen urban districts. In each one of them there is a Local Board, being the political body responsible of planning, directing and controlling the municipal projects carried out in its jurisdiction. There is also a Neighborhood Council, being the social body responsible of identifying the needs and aspirations of the community, assessing the priorities for municipal investment in the district and securing the participatory nature of the municipal projects. Finally, there is a Zonal Communal Center, the sub-municipal office in charge of the general administration and provision of municipal services in the district. The second structure consists of the pre-existing framework of management, based on a large bureaucracy in the municipal headquarters and on the politicians of the Junta Departamental (Municipal Council).

These two structures are the scenario of different political struggles. The central bureaucracy still holds a large amount of power, related to its capacity to deal with - and hiding, or 'losing' - vital resources for urban management; i.e. information and administrative procedures. Moreover, the Junta Departamental is still, according to the prevailing national legislation, the political body responsible for the final approval of every municipal project. The decentralized bodies may prepare their own proposals, these initiatives can be integrated in an strategic plan for urban development, but the final decision on investment and procedures related to all these proposals remain in the hands of the thirty-one ediles (departmental legislators). At present, there is no real contradiction between the proposals coming from the grassroots or the city mayor and the decisions taken by the municipal council, since the majority of the ediles belong to the Frente Amplio. This cleavage between 'old' and 'new' structures might hinder the long-range sustainability of the process of decentralization, although a triumph of the opposition in the coming elections of 1999 is highly improbable.

From the perspective of public policy, decentralization is a requirement for a greater administrative efficiency. It is frequently argued in Latin America that the traditional concentration and fragmentation of public administration has become expensive, inefficient and bureaucratic, not able of responding to the new demands and interests presented by civil society. On the contrary, programs and projects close to the local-daily reality are conceived as opportunities for progress hampered by the central administration. Throughout Latin America, including Uruguay - as it was shown by the electoral campaign around the plebiscite on a constitutional reform held in December 1996 - the paradigm of decentralization is defended by the proponents of downsizing the state as well as those that consider decentralization as a prerequisite for expanding social policies.

Revisiting the experience of Montevideo, it is not possible to assume a priori that local governments are capable of assuming new roles and that people want decentralization. After various decades of evolution of a model of municipal management highly concentrated on the
hands and minds of bureaucrats and politicians based on the municipal central offices and the city council, the Montevideanos were accustomed to a passive role in their relations with the local government. It is not surprising that contradicting the expectations and ideological assumptions of the Frente Amplio, when the decentralized bodies were established the community did not rush to demand its right to participate. Demands of municipal services surmounted by far the proposals for 'alternative' urban management. The efforts to expand and replicate the process of decentralization and citizens' participation - the construction of an *integral democracy* in the sense proposed by Arruda and Boff - require consciousness raising and the communication of the potential usefulness of this process. Initiatives such as *Montevideo en Foro* seem to be aiming in this direction.

Decentralization has a clear cultural dimension. One of the great obstacles to overcome is the resistance to change, beyond administrative conditions. Overcoming cultural blockades would mean development different representations of public services, politics and the relation between the state and civil society. Decentralization cannot be established by decree. A norm is necessary, but not sufficient requirement; it does not have the virtue of generating per sé social change.

The experience of Montevideo also shows very clearly who are the supporters and who are the adversaries of participatory local governance. The general and up-to-date literature on decentralization and public policy points to multiple resistances to the direct participation of the community in public affairs. They can be particularly observed in Uruguay; among others:

* Resistance by agencies and policy-makers of the central government that do no trust the management capacity of decentralized structures or fear that the process will fall out of their control. In the particular case of Montevideo, this reality was aggravated by the wide ideological divide between the Frente Amplio and the right-wing coalition in power (*Colorado* and *Nacional* parties) at the national level.

* Resistance by local political *caudillos* (party bosses) of the two traditional parties, whose power was traditionally based on clientelistic connections with the municipality or the central government, and that see decentralization as a threat to their political power. In several cases, this resistance has been 'institutionalized' within the decentralized structures, as they have been elected as members of the Neighborhood Councils or appointed to represent the opposition in the Local Boards or in *Junta* Departamental.

* Resistance by leftist *militantes*, who fear that the consolidation of the process of decentralization could weaken the control of the party over some CBOs or social movements or modify the current balance of power within the Frente Amplio. In other cases, there is a fear that decentralization could displace the party or the labor movement as the primary agents of political and social change. * Resistance by municipal employees, that interpret decentralization and citizens' participation as a threat to their routine performance and administrative style, since the new structures would be against the inefficiency, inefficacy, authoritarianism, venality and monopoly of information that characterized their positions under the previous model of municipal government. * Resistance by wealthy proprietors and residents of the upper-income districts, that fear that the Frente Amplio could introduce leftist measures threatening their life-styles and privileges in the access to urban infrastructure and social-services.
The support that the Left is collecting after two periods of successful municipal government is a fact seriously considered by the two traditional parties. They did not only built a united front against the Frente Amplio in the municipal council; they also promoted the inclusion of the system of ballotage in the aforementioned constitutional reform, in order to blockade the triumph of the Left in the coming national elections (1999).

There are several aspects and elements of the experience of democratic local governance in Montevideo that deserve further research, and that if analyzed from a perspective of public policy could lead to corrections in the existing municipal structures. In spite of the relatively homogenous social tissue of the city, the reactions to decentralization have been quite diverse throughout the eighteen sub-municipal districts. How to recognize the differences and formulate a program of decentralization taking into account the diverse 'rhythms' and peculiarities of each district, whilst at the same time achieving a city-wide equitable local development? What is the state of management in the districts and how to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of the CCZ, Neighborhood Councils and Local Boards? How is the process of decentralization and citizens' participation affecting the internal dynamics and public appeals of the political parties and urban social movements? What is the impact of this process over the ideological and programmatic horizon of the Uruguayan Left? Could the process initiated in Montevideo be the starting point of a broader project for social and political change at the national level?

The Montevideanos and Uruguayans in general are already providing some preliminary responses to the previous questions. In December of 1996 the majority of the people - even against the opposition campaign conducted by some parties of the Frente Amplio - approved a constitutional reform that will enable decentralization at the national level, allowing the transference of responsibilities and resources to the municipalities and the creation of elective Juntas Locales (local councils) in all the country. Moreover, a recent survey published by the weekly magazine Posdata (1998), shows that after eight years of leftist municipal government, a clear majority of Montevideanos consider that the city has improved (56%) or greatly improved (17%) in relation to a decade ago. This positive image does not only come from supporters of the Frente Amplio, but from adherents of all the other Uruguayan parties as well. References


NOTAS


[1] For an overall picture of the economic, social and political context of Latin American cities, see Rodriguez and Winchester (1996) Texto


[3] The Uruguayan Constitution assures the right to oppose any law approved by the Parliament or plebiscite new socially initiated legal proposals. In order to organize a referendum, the law requires the presentation of approximately 600,000 signatures of registered voters (the total population of Uruguay barely exceeds three million inhabitants). The results of the referendums have not always been favorable to the interests of the progressive forces: in 1989 the majority of the people decided to reaffirm the amnesty to the military granted by the parliament. On the contrary, in 1992 Uruguayans citizens overwhelmingly rejected the privatization of public enterprises proposed by the neoliberal coalition in power. Texto

[4] I am not particularly pointing to the electoral history of Uruguay, but to more blatant examples coming from Mexico, Central America or neighboring Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. However, Uruguay did register a long tradition of political manipulation via
clientelism, especially in relation to the trade-off of votes by jobs in the municipality, based on an almost uninterrupted rule of the Colorado Party for more than five decades. \[\text{Texto}\]

\[\text{[5]}\] For a brief but comprehensive balance of the results of neoliberalism in Latin America since the mid-1980s, see Petras (1997) and Richards (1997). \[\text{Texto}\]

\[\text{[6]}\] For an extensive and in-depth discussion of the concept of \textit{local development}, see Helmsing and Guimaraes (1998). \[\text{Texto}\]

\[\text{[7]}\] In the case of the Frente Amplio the representatives were elected in open elections. In December 1996 the Uruguayans approved by referendum a constitutional reform that included the elective character of all the members of the \textit{Juntas Locales} in all cities, as proposed by the Left. \[\text{Texto}\]

\[\text{[8]}\] By the end of 1995, the level of popularity of Mariano Arana, the architect and urban planner that leads the second term of municipal office of the Frente Amplio, reached a maximum of 70% in public opinion polls, the highest ever held by an Uruguayan municipal mayor. \[\text{Texto}\]

\[\text{[9]}\] MERCOSUR is the Spanish acronym for Southern Common Market, a regional free-trade area and customs union integrated by Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay as full members and Chile and Bolivia as associated states. This regional agreement was established in 1991, after the signing of the Treaty of Asuncion. \[\text{Texto}\]

\[\text{[10]}\] Between 1973 and 1985, after harshly repressing every expression of social discontent, the military appointed a group of neoliberal technocrats that introduced a new set of economic policies, causing a regressive distribution of wealth in detriment of Uruguayan workers. Between 1968 and 1984 the real salary of urban wage-earners registered a fall of more than 50%, and from 1979 to 1984 the number of households below the poverty line raised from 13% to 20% (Melgar and Villalobos, 1986). \[\text{Texto}\]

\[\text{[11]}\] The term \textit{Batllista} refers to the figure of Jose Batlle y Ordoñez, the leader of the Colorado Party that served two presidential periods in the early 1900s laying the foundations of the Uruguayan welfare-state. The high productivity of a cattle-rising economy generated a surplus that enabled the state to run advanced policies of social security, public education and industrialization. Until the mid-1960s Uruguay was by far the most prosperous and equitable society of Latin America, before falling in a circle of chronic inflation, political instability and social conflict (for an in-depth interpretation of the Uruguayan welfare state see Finch, 1985). Up to date, Uruguay enjoys the remains of previous affluence: it was ranked in the position 38, among the countries of higher human development, in the 1998 edition of the UNDP Report, but the prospects for further evolution are uncertain. \[\text{Texto}\]

\[\text{[12]}\] Of particular importance has been the role of \textit{FUCVAM}, the United Federation of Mutual Aid Housing Cooperatives, the most powerful and dynamic urban social movement of the last three decades in Uruguay. The activists of the cooperative housing movement have a very active participation in the Neighborhood Councils throughout the city, demanding a more clear ‘social profile’ to the municipal government and presenting articulated proposals for urban development. For a more complete presentation of the history and aims of this movement and
According to official statistics (INE, 1997), unemployment is above the national standard: while the national index for the year 1996 was 11.9%, in Montevideo was 12.3%. Montevideo also had a higher activity rate: 66.6%, compared to 58.2% for the rest of country. Unemployment specially affects the youth: the index was 20% for the population between 20 and 24.

For a more detailed description of these programs, see Portillo (1996).

The population of Montevideo is fairly homogenous by Latin American standards: the vast majority descends from Italian, Spanish and Central European immigrants arrived between 1850 and World War II. The native population was annihilated in the 1830s. According to recent investigations performed by anthropologists from the National University, Afro-Uruguayans make up between 5% and 10% of the national population.

At present, the literacy rate of the country is 97%: the highest in Latin America.

The Frente Amplio had a threefold objective, regarding social justice, higher municipal revenues, and the collection of needed information for planning and management. It aimed to make taxation more equitable, considering the existing disparities in a city where the top 10% of the properties equaled the value of the remaining 90%. It also attempted to collect updated information on the use of the urban space, enabling the municipality to plan further developments in the city. The most active popular organizations, led by FUCVAM (see footnote 11) tried to call a referendum rejecting the blockade by the national parliament, but after three months they did not success in obtaining the required number of signatures.

I am referring to two simultaneous processes of decentralization: at the national and at the municipal levels. Under the military dictatorship headed by Pinochet (1973 - 1989), the country was decentralized in *regiones*, and the capital city, Santiago, was divided in several autonomous municipalities. In both cases, the result was a widening of the gap between richer and poorer areas and social sectors.

The municipality of Montevideo was throughout the century a political stronghold of the *Colorado* Party and a central component of clientelistic practices. Due to this situation, a large number of municipal workers were voters or activists of this party, therefore opposed to the Frente Amplio. Based on constitutional guarantees, it is very difficult for a new government (at any level) to fire civil servants. After eight years of left-led local government, the municipal directors and the decentralized bodies still have to cope with a decreasing, but still strong, internal opposition based on administrative or technical staff. A detailed account of the conflictive relationship between the local government and the union of municipal workers (ADEOM) between 1985 and 1993, can be found in Chasquetti (1995).

According to the Uruguayan legislation, the mandate of the *ediles* last five years. The same legislation assures that the principle of proportional representation is valid to appoint the members of the national parliament, but not for the *Junta Departamental*, reserving sixteen seats in thirty-one for the ruling party. Recent surveys, coinciding with the general opinion of independent political analysts, indicate that the preponderance of the Left in
Montevideo is at present practically irreversible: they predict another triumph of the Frente Amplio in the coming municipal elections of 1989 with close than 50% of the votes, as well as a probable triumph in the elections for the national government. Currently, the Frente Amplio has almost a third of the seats in both chambers of the national parliament. *Texto*

[21] Even though the Frente Amplio functions as one integrated party, with a common presidential candidate and one single political program, currently is a coalition of eighteen leftist parties, ranging from the former urban guerrilla *Tupamaros* to European-style Socialists and Christian Democrats. Since its creation in 1971, up until the late 1980s the Communist Party of Uruguay (PCU) was the hegemonic force; after the fall of the Berlin Wall the main divide opposes the so-called *radicales* (the *Tupamaros* and other minor extreme-left groups) and the so-called *moderados* (Socialist Party of Uruguay - PSU, Asamblea Uruguay and *Vertiente Artiguista*). However, as the national election gets nearer, the distinction between radicales y moderados tends to be substituted by more pragmatic divisions based on purely electoral ambitions. *Texto*

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