

the matter: economists like him may applaud Chile for resembling “a southern European country, such as Portugal or Spain” (p. 3), but in reality, its government expenditure as a percentage of the GDP has remained at 23% on average in the past thirty years—half of Portugal’s equivalent (46%). They may extol Chile for surpassing Costa Rica’s GDP “by a very wide margin” (p. 18) while, in truth, Chileans envy the universal healthcare and constitutionally protected public education system enjoyed by Costa Ricans. In a word: the 2019 uprising was not paradoxical, it was long overdue.

These criticisms notwithstanding, *The Chile Project* is a thought-provoking and essential read precisely because it compels us to ponder what made neoliberalism work in Chile. Furthermore, it asks us to consider that, despite being economically erratic, the dictatorship devised a crucial financial infrastructure from which the new democracy could blossom. The book also compels one to rethink the term “neoliberalism.” For Edwards, it represents “the use of market mechanisms to solve most of society’s problems and needs” (p. 14). Devoid of any consideration of power and geopolitical interests, this definition might seem limited to some. After all, if *The Chile Project* illustrates anything, it is what a nation’s *race to the bottom* looks like. Edwards’s depiction of Chile’s withdrawal from the Andean Pact, which enabled the reduction of import duties, is a case in point (p. 115). Whether Chile received any preferential treatment for being the “poster child for neoliberalism” (p. 278) and whether this model can be reformed without the country spiraling into economic crisis are other questions the book evokes. In this respect, it is worthwhile to mention a prophecy Edwards makes: Chile will certainly “replace the old constitution with a new one that will enshrine and guarantee many social rights that will be provided for free by the state” (p. 8). This is an optimistic stance for a man who experienced September 11, 1973 firsthand. As history shows, in the neoliberal world, power and privilege are rarely given away easily.

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MARGARET CHOWNING, *Catholic Women and Mexican Politics, 1750-1850*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.

The new book by Margaret Chowning is a highly welcome contribution to the relatively scarce literature on women in Mexico and, in particular, on women in politics after Independence. It is also an example of methodologically sound, innovative, and inspiring historiographical writing. Chowning focuses on women in politics during the nineteenth century, broadening her scope by

looking at the second half of the eighteenth century in order to establish the situation prior to the changes brought about by the political revolution within Independence, and extending it until after the Mexican Revolution. Chowning contends that women who were excluded from political citizenship rights after Independence sought to exercise citizenship through their involvement in the Catholic Church. There, women did find possibilities to create a space for their own engagement with politics and to influence the society they lived in. Surprisingly, in contrast with women's present-day possibilities of exercising influence in the Catholic Church, Mexican women did gain power within the Church especially during the mid-nineteenth century. Therefore, Chowning questions the widely shared assumption that the Mexican Revolution was the time when women finally gained more rights and offers a different interpretation. Instead, Chowning contends, this was only true for liberal and radical women. Catholic women had already found a way to become politically active during the 1850s. Furthermore, and perhaps even more important, Chowning also has a lot to say about the hypothesis that women were more religious than men. She carefully argues that religion was the sphere where women had a chance to participate in public life because the family, i.e. children, care work, and morality, was considered their space.

To make her case, Chowning delves into the world of Catholic lay associations in Mexican urban environments and shows how women played an increasingly important role in the decades after Independence. Chowning defines as urban towns with a population of 2,000 inhabitants or above. That is, her study focuses on a broad spectrum of Mexican society, even though Indigenous villages and towns are not considered. The impressive number of sources Chowning was able to retrieve in various local, regional, and national archives forms the basis for a sophisticated argumentation. This intensive archival research explains why it took Chowning twenty years to bring this project to fruition. It is admirable that she did not lose sight of it. In addition, the structure of her book is stimulating as it features a mix of chapters on social structures and on politics.

Chowning begins with a chapter on *cofradías* (lay brotherhoods) and their social structures during the late colonial era and focuses on membership structures in different social contexts and gender roles within the associations. During the second half of the eighteenth century, most *cofradías* had more women than men in their ranks, regardless of whether the majority of members was from the elite or from lower social strata. Nevertheless, female and male members were assigned different roles within the associations and women almost never fulfilled leadership duties. Only at the end of the colonial era did women aspire to take on more important roles in *cofradías*. When the Crown authorized a devotional *cofradía*, the Real Congregación del Alumbrado y Vela Continua

del Santísimo Sacramento, the clerics responsible for its foundation in Mexico City intended to include a section for women with female officers. Chowning posits the hypothesis that otherwise the Royal Congregation would not have functioned because of the heavy load of devotional practices. In another case, elite women intended to found a charitable *cofradía* in which they envisioned themselves as leaders guiding women from lower social strata as they handled the care work. During the wars of Independence and afterwards, the gender balance shifted even more toward women as overall membership declined. The war and economic problems endangered many *cofradías* and less and less men accepted leading positions in *cofradías*. Changes in the perception of gender roles also contributed to this development. Republican ideals saw a clear separation of the male and female spheres. Whereas men as rational beings dominated the public sphere and citizenship was closely linked to military service and electoral rights, women were seen as responsible for the private sphere and especially for educating children. At the same time, many church men had financial problems. There were more seminarists than parish priests and many of them depended on the declining *cofradías* for their livelihood. This overall situation brought many church men to endorse women officers in *cofradías*.

The following chapters thoroughly reconstruct the rising involvement of women in Catholic lay associations from the 1830s onwards with a first peak in the 1840s and 1850s. Several developments were important because they induced female participation, among which changes in devotional practices that no longer emphasized male forms of behavior made it possible for women to join. Furthermore, new forms of lay associations appeared in Mexico, as for example the originally French Vincentian Order and associated lay organizations that focused on charitable work. Many women welcomed the opportunity to engage in these new associations that sprung in Mexico, especially in those regions that had been mostly affected by the war of Independence. Even though the new associations were always led by priests, Chowning has several examples showing that women officers consciously defended their association and interests in cases of conflict. Women also began to intervene more openly in political issues debated on a national scale. This was the case in a petition campaign in 1848/1849 and culminated in a larger one in 1856/1857 when the Constitutional Congress discussed freedom of worship. Again, Chowning's discussion of these petitions, their authorship, and how the signatures (going into hundreds) were obtained is balanced and exemplary.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the further development of women's roles in Catholic lay associations during the Reforma, a period of intensive political conflicts and economic problems. During these years, associations flourished and women lay associations were no exception, anticlerical laws notwithstanding. These laws

posed a dilemma for the Church hierarchy, which therefore had little influence on local associations. Especially successful was the *Vela Perpetua*, a devotional lay association, and the charitable *Asociación de la Caridad*. When the new president Lerdo de Tejada sought to further tighten the anti-clerical regulations with the *Ley orgánica* in 1874, a new petition campaign was launched. Women's petitions, now sometimes signed by thousands, made up 55% of all petitions. In addition, women were more aggressive in their tone and openly claimed their right to interfere in politics. The last two chapters deal with the Porfiriato and the epilogue refers to the Mexican Revolution. The Porfiriato represented a conservative backlash that also affected women's rights. In the Catholic Church the Vatican played a larger role and influenced devotional practices and lay associations. Traditional gender roles that subordinated women to men were now more often imposed on these associations and women had less opportunities to assert their interests. All in all, Chowning observes a convergence of liberals and conservatives on gender roles during this period.

To conclude: Chowning broadens the field of politics by considering forms of involvement different from those of statesmen and official actions. This contention in itself is not new (see "the personal is political") but Chowning uses it productively to show that engagement on the local level is equally political in the sense that communities are built upon these actions and women played an important role in this. Furthermore, Chowning comes to the surprising but convincing conclusion that during the nineteenth century, liberalism in Mexico was less liberal when it came to women's rights than conservatives. Chowning's writing is not only very accessible, it is, more importantly, transparent. The author discusses different theoretical positions and explains why she tends more toward one interpretation than another. Furthermore, she is also very clear about what the sources say and how and why she draws her conclusions. This is exemplary and could help students at all levels understand the workings of historians. For scholars, this study is important because it constitutes groundbreaking research on associationism and women in the public sphere during the nineteenth century.

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