RE-GENDERING LATIN AMERICA

GÉNERO EN AMÉRICA LATINA

Guest Editors / Edición a cargo de

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Introduction

Research on gender as a category of historical and contemporary analysis has flourished since Joan W. Scott challenged her colleagues to rethink the past by focusing on the ways power and social relations are constituted based on perceived differences between the sexes.[1] Over the past two decades, academics have carefully analyzed the ways in which gender has been constructed and maintained in different times throughout the world. There now exists an established and growing scholarship on gender in Latin America.

Many factors are contributing to the expansion of this area of study. The multiple agendas of women's movements throughout the continent have raised the issues of divorce, abortion, rape, domestic violence, and sexuality. Examinations of the constructions of masculinity now complement the vast literature on women that has developed alongside the emergence of Latin American feminist movements and reverberated within academia. Gay and lesbian organizations have been formed in almost all Latin American countries, challenging traditional notions of family, gender roles, and sexual identity. These movements have also provoked a series of new questions for historians and social scientists about the concrete day-to-day dynamics of power. Moreover, many scholars' turning away from Marxism in the 1970s in favor of post-structural, post-modern, and Foucauldian approaches to history and contemporary studies have offered new

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theoretical approaches to studying gender and sexuality. The AIDS pandemic has inspired social scientists and others to investigate the complex patterns of sexuality in Latin America as an integrative component of the gender-based shaping and reshaping of bodies and behaviors. In short, over the last decade an exciting, broad field of scholarly investigation has found space within Latin American universities and among those studying Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America from afar.

Still, much work remains to be done. Most of the major Latin American history textbooks still treat gender as an afterthought. They often equate gender with women and ignore the relationship between gender and the broader parameters of power in Latin America. The intention of this special issue on gender in Latin America is to push the intellectual debates beyond traditional notions and categories. Recent scholarship no longer simply documents the oppression of women and the marginal status of those engaged in non-normative sexuality. Nor is agency in and of itself the primary focus of most current research. The articles in this issue reflect the movement inside the academy beyond simplistic answers to questions related to gender and sexuality within the context of the social environment of historical and present-day Latin America. The proliferation of consumer capitalism and the neo-liberal restructuring of national economies have also opened the floodgates for the reception of international cultural images, debates, discourses, and influences that bombard people with a wide variety of different and conflicting messages related to masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. Within this context, the authors of the articles in this issue of *EIAL* have taken up the challenge of rethinking how the past and the present can be re-interpreted through analytical lenses that refract the multiple meanings, symbols, and practices that gender us all.

The issue begins with Nara Milanich's examination of domestic servants in late 19th century Chile. Although elite discourse promoted the formation of the stable working-class family, Milanich shows that in practice the elite prevented such families from forming. For the orphan girls who are the focus of this study, the only viable work option was domestic servitude. Such jobs almost universally employed single girls and women, while employers fired those who became pregnant. Thus, the class and gender status of these orphan girls prevented them from forming stable familial relationships. Milanich examines the orphanage as an institution and provides us with details regarding the lives of the girls and women emerging from it. Contrasting this focus on everyday life with her reading of elite discourse, Milanich shows us that the realities of the social sphere do not always conform with what the elite assumes to be the case.

Peter M. Beattie's micro-study of the disputed sale of the slave Silvestre in Recife, Brazil, in the 1870s foregrounds different strategies employed by

slaves and their masters to contest ownership and dispute property claims. As Beattie suggests, the different claimants in a law suit over the proper sale of Silvestre clashed about appropriate sexuality and behavior and used divergent notions of manhood and morality to argue their case that in part revolved around Silvestre's alleged practice of the "repugnant vice of sodomy." The role of two court-appointed physicians in assessing Silvestre's psychological state reveals the increasing importance and influence of the medical profession in late 19th century Brazil (and the rest of Latin America). These new arbiters of knowledge and morality slowly replaced the Church as determiners of proper sexuality and healthy behavior. Beattie contends that as the legitimacy of Brazilian slavery weakened in the late 19th century, slaveholders grasped at feeble defenses, such as linking flogging and mistreatment of slaves to mental illness and sexual "vice," not as a criticism of the institution but as a meager attempt to maintain their economic interests. This study carefully documents how disputed discourses about a slave's body, his sexuality, and his gender-based essence reveal the ways in which these notions were not fixed, immutable categories.

Cuban historian Abel Sierra Madero offers a pioneering study of same-sex sexuality on the island during the 19th century. Pointing out that Cuban historical production has tended to understand the nation's past through battles, wars, and revolution, Madero subverts this traditional approach by rewriting the national narrative and including the excluded. His scholarship is archeological in that it has required finding the fragments of references within Cuban archives that can suggest the social history of men and women who maintained sexual and emotional relations with others of the same sex. Madero's work compliments the recent scholarship by historians of same-sex erotic sociability in late 19th and early 20th century Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina. His rereading of historical accounts that describe effeminacy among the notoriously virile and masculine *mambise* fighters in the Wars of Independence reminds us how many national myths are constructed and reified.

Susan Besse's study of Brazilian beauty contests in the 1920s presents a unique way of examining the intersection of constructions of appropriate gender models with notions of racial identity and their relationship to modernity. These competitions provided a public forum where different conceptions of femininity and race could be displayed. In the process, those racial, class, and gender characteristics that did not conform to the idealized norm were excluded and marginalized at the same time that an idyllic model became fashioned as the "authentic" Brazilian woman. The beauty contests, supported by commercial interests that promoted national voting to choose the winning candidates, also projected a link between a specific type of feminine attractiveness, a unified "democratic nation," and a country rapidly becoming "advanced" and modern.

In her essay, Besse artfully draws the connections between what could be seen as a superficial public contest and deeply embedded ideas about Brazilian women, their bodies, and their comportment as symbols of a modern nation in formation.

In her work on Mexican workers brought to the United States through the Bracero program, Deborah Cohen argues that notions of maleness were central to the establishment of this labor recruitment effort during World War II. Focusing on Bracero workers, Cohen suggests that working class and peasant masculinity have been a central part of 20th century Mexican state formation. Cohen focuses on one set of events, the selection process for the Bracero program, as a ritual of masculinity. This process brought men together into a public space in which they were recognized as "socially visible citizens." The focus of Cohen's attention on citizenship, modernity, and masculinity is an excellent example of the ways in which political historians have begun to understand the relationship between gender and the modern state.

As part of an on-going research project examining shifting gender relations in a working-class neighborhood of Mexico City, Matthew Gutmann considers how members of this community understand the family and childrearing within the context of men's abandonment of their families. Whether because of migration to the United States for economic opportunities, or due to a myriad of other reasons, the absence of fathers has placed greater burdens on women, although Gutmann is quick to point out that at times women's economic lives actually improve when an alcoholic or spendthrift male is not longer draining limited family resources. The participation of many women in social movements, the growing necessities for women to work outside the home for a family's survival, and ongoing day-to-day pressures that women place on their husbands or partners have also loosened formerly rigidly defined notions of appropriate gendered participation in household chores and responsibilities. Gutmann notes that members of this working-class community now consider fathers' abandonment of their children as less "natural" and acceptable, in the context of reconstituting frameworks of gendered interactions. This provocative piece also suggests new paths for research about masculinity, fatherhood, and the family in Mexico.

Cecília MacDowell Santos and Wânia Pasinato Izumino conclude this issue with an assessment of the state of feminist studies in Brazil. During the period of the demise of the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1964 to 1985, a vibrant feminist movement burst onto the political scene both to challenge traditional leftist attitudes and practices and to demand that the state intervene actively to address issues of domestic violence. The dramatic increase in non-government organizations, feminist studies, and state-sponsored programs have produced a rich and diverse experience upon which to evaluate alternative

strategies and theories offered by feminist scholars in addressing sexism and patriarchal hierarchies embedded in Brazilian culture and society. This article examines the response of feminists and the academy to studies about violence against women. As such, the article plots the deep connection between those involved in quotidian issues related to gender and a proactive political research agenda.

All in all, these articles reflect the richness of academic production by scholars working on gender and sexuality. These authors are representative of a new generation of scholars working on Latin America that has taken this field of investigation to a new level of excellence.

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NOTES

1. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053-1075.