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POWER, POLICY, AND NEOLIBERALISM

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cical economy of capitalism, imperialism, and socialism in the Americas. The authors, however—not Latin American Perspectives or Sage Publications—are responsible for their own views, sources of information, writing style, and so on. Our objective is to encourage class analysis of sociocultural realities and political strategies to transform Latin American sociopolitical structures. We make a conscious effort to publish a diversity of political viewpoints, both Marxists and non-Marxist perspectives, that have influenced progressive debates in Latin America. Top priority will be given to articles that strike directly at the most important theoretical issues, particularly subjects that have re
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Introduction

This issue submits neoliberal policy to several analytical perspectives and presents case studies of groups opposing its devastating effects. Claudio Katz contends that imperialistic actions are more structural than subjectively determined. Mary Castro warns us of the distortions that neoliberal institutions foment by overlooking the need to combine class and social movements. Norma Giarracca and Miguel Teubal describe a rural women’s movement in Argentina formed around the issue of debt relief. Lynn Stephen demonstrates the necessity of identity politics in providing a unifying force and front in confronting power.

Globalization and cases of imperialism are often described in terms of class struggle or Machiavellian political strategy by the ruling class. Katz contends that by staying at the political level we miss the structural analysis that imperialism can provide as the basis for these political decisions. In particular, he argues that the falling rate of profit is key in understanding the process of globalization. He uses Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto to demonstrate the theoretical clarity that results when “accumulation,” “imperialism,” “production process,” and other Marxist concepts are employed. Following the Manifesto, scholars would understand that the state is not being weakened but being reorganized for global hegemony and recognize the importance of the internationalization of the productive process. Katz emphasizes that reducing globalization to the purely political precludes interpreting it in its totality as a process derived from the logic and laws of capital. Seen in this light, the Manifesto’s call for the workers of the world to unite is still a relevant basis for constructing socialism today. Katz’s advocacy of more theory in the analysis of the world economy should be appreciated by LAP readers.

Mary Castro critiques Latin American feminist politics and calls for combining the relations of class and the demands of the movement. She points to neoliberal influences on feminist thinking through mechanisms such as nongovernmental organizations that institutionalize feminism. She proposes a radical reorientation of feminism as a reflective category intrinsic to the politics of the left. The liberation of women will occur, she argues, only as an integral part of the struggle of the working class and movements by blacks, gays, and others.

Norma Giarracca and Miguel Teubal provide a case study of rural women in Argentina organizing for debt relief of the family farm. It shows the
growing importance of rural women’s organizations in Latin American social movements and the depth of the agrarian crisis under neoliberalism. During the 1990s there was a significant increase in agricultural loans, in particular to the fertile pampas region, and many small and medium-sized farmers quickly became insolvent. In 1995 Lucy de Cornelis, the wife of an indebted farmer, unwilling to lose the family farm, went on the radio to address this injustice and converse with others facing a similar situation. This act grew into the Movimiento Mujeres Agropecuarias en Lucha (Agricultural Women in Struggle Movement—MML), which blocked hundreds of confiscations and represented rural women’s concerns. It is unusual in having begun as an autonomous rural women’s organization rather than an offshoot of an existing peasant organization or rural union. It has formed and maintained international contacts with Mexico’s Barzón and Brazil’s Movimento Sem Terra with the goal of forming a Latin American rural debtors’ movement. The MML is a fascinating story of people evolving from self-understanding to collective action in resistance to the crisis that neoliberal policies create.

Identity politics has come under increasing criticism, but Lynn Stephen contends that, no matter how flawed, it is still useful to grassroots movements. Following the work of Stuart Hall, she maintains that the key to understanding identification is to see it not as static but as “conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured it does not obliterate difference. . . . Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption.” In order to negotiate with governments and make themselves understood to those outside the movement, it is necessary for members to project a “sameness.” However, this does not indicate how the movement operates or that there is a shared consciousness. Participation in organizing is “a constant process of negotiating difference.” To illustrate this, she uses the cases of CO-MADRES (Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared, and Assassinated of El Salvador) and the women in the National Indigenous Congress in Mexico. The indigenous women helping to formulate the platform of the congress came from diverse backgrounds and had diverse demands, and “this process did not create a homogeneous identity out of many but provided a discursive field within which women participated from different fields.” At the same time, “identities involve discursive processes of essentialization and homogenization,” and this implies a citizenship strategy that it is based not on an abstract notion of universal citizenship but on affirmative action. Furthermore, identity will change because the self changes over time.

—Ward Schinke
The *Manifesto* and Globalization

by

Claudio Katz

Translated by Carlos Pérez

The *Communist Manifesto* anticipated the present process of globalization, and the subsequent theory of imperialism provides a more direct theoretical foundation for understanding it than the theories associated with Keynesianism, which approach economic problems in purely national terms. This article emphasizes the relationship between the incipient globalization of the productive process and the laws of capitalist development, questioning the apologetic neoliberal view of globalization. It links the transformation of the division of the labor process, new forms of investment, mergers, and technological changes to an increase in the internationalization of production and underscores how this process contributes to increasing exploitation, unemployment, and poverty. It points to the difficulty of analyzing globalization from a purely commercial or financial perspective. In addition, it examines the problems associated not only with a dogmatic denial of the new phenomenon but also with characterizing it exclusively in political terms. It concludes by emphasizing the continuing relevance of the *Manifesto* for the construction of a socialist project based on the politics of working-class internationalism.

The paragraphs of the *Communist Manifesto* devoted to the worldwide expansion of capitalism continue to impress commentators on the text. Marx and Engels’s (1967) 1848 descriptions of the creation of a world market, economic cosmopolitanism, the universal extension of commercial rules, and the destruction of tariff barriers have a surprisingly contemporary ring to them. The *Manifesto* anticipated the international character of accumulation with the same insight as *Capital* presaged the cyclical crises of capitalism. On many levels, these two texts have a deeper correspondence with our present economic reality than with that of the nineteenth century.

Claudio Katz, an economist, is a professor and researcher at the University of Buenos Aires and Argentina’s National Council of Scientific and Technical Investigations. Carlos Pérez teaches Chicano and Latin American Studies at California State University, Fresno.
However, the important predictions that the Manifesto contains do not make it a picture of globalization today. This overstatement places the text outside of its own history. Alongside The Poverty of Philosophy and “Wage-Labor and Capital,” the Manifesto is situated at the midpoint of the maturation of Marx’s economic thought (Mandel, 1967). During this period the German theorist had elaborated his critique of private property, discovered the centrality of labor, transcended the anthropological analysis of alienation, and grasped the usefulness of the materialist conception of history. He had not yet assimilated or gone beyond Ricardo’s ideas, however, and he had not reformulated the labor theory of value or that of surplus value. His analysis of the workings of capitalism was clearly evolving, and it contained certain characterizations that would subsequently be modified and refined.

The analogy between the worker and the slave that appears in the Manifesto has, for example, points of agreement with Ricardo’s “subsistence salary.” Salary is not yet characterized as a sociohistorical reality impacted contradictorily by accumulation and one whose evolution is associated with the changing value of the labor force. This is why the thesis of “growing misery” emerges in place of the subsequent concept of the relative decline of wages in relation to profit and the level of accumulation. Given that the general analysis of the process of value had not yet been completed, crises are presented in the Manifesto as exclusively the effect of underconsumption, without consideration of the constriction of purchasing power with the declining rate of profit. Some of these shortcomings are also observed in the concept of the process of global accumulation.

In his mature works, Marx completes his characterization of the intrinsic tendency of capital to break down national borders with more precise studies on the world market (Marx, 1973). On one hand, he discovers how the different modes of primitive accumulation led to the consolidation of industrial capital in the advanced countries. On the other hand, he tackles some of the problems associated with international commerce in opposition to Ricardo’s thesis of “comparative advantage.” He establishes the foundations for a theory of unequal exchange by emphasizing that the compensation of higher labor productivity is greater than that of lower labor productivity.

All of these ideas correspond to Marx’s predominantly national analysis of capitalism. His study of tariffs, wages, prices, and capital movement assumes an industrialized national economy modeled on Britain’s. The most significant aspect of this period of free trade on the international level is the role of commerce in the configuration of the distinct processes of national accumulation. Although Marx furnishes the basic theoretical elements for an
understanding of globalization, his writings only sketch the bare outlines of such an understanding.

**IMPERIALISM**

The immediate antecedents of the current discussion of globalization are found in the theory of imperialism formulated in the early twentieth century by Lenin, Luxemburg, Bukharin, and Trotsky. Their analysis sought an interpretation of the great transformation that occurred when monopoly replaced free-trade capitalism. This change was based on an important advancement in the internationalization of the economy, especially on the commercial and financial level, as well as on the development of the first forms of direct investment. The four theorists postulated convergent characterizations of a single phenomenon but highlighted different and controversial aspects of the new stage.

For Lenin (1973), the international expansion of capital implied the parasitic predominance of financial capital along with the creation of monopolies that stifled free trade. For Luxemburg (1968), what was important was the core nations’ reaction to underconsumption—exporting their unsold surplus to the periphery. She believed that the collapse of these compensatory peripheral markets led to a point in the crises of profitability where there would be a characteristic decline.

Bukharin (1971), in contrast, saw a new type of contradiction emerging under capitalism as a result of the conflict between the persistence of national forms of appropriating profit and increasing economic internationalization. He emphasized that the monopolistic groups that globalized their networks of supplies, production, and commercialization tended to coalesce around increasingly protectionist states. He believed that this process produced not only the “internationalization” of capital but also its “nationalization.”

Trotsky’s (1972) initial analysis underscored that the primary consequence of the creation of a unified world market was a widening of the gulf between the developed and the underdeveloped countries. He asserted that this polarization drastically reduced the peripheral countries’ opportunity for replicating the accelerated industrial development of the central powers. With the construction of a world capitalist system, Trotsky concluded, it was impossible to isolate a triumphant revolution’s socioeconomic development from international conditions, and this is why he considered the attempt to “construct socialism in one country” utopian (Trotsky, 1969). He understood that the new imperialist stage demanded a revision of the strategy and project of socialism on a world scale.
These four interpretations represent the theoretical foundations for an analysis of globalization because from different angles they characterize the transformations that capital penetration introduces into all corners of the world. To assess these contributions, however, it is necessary to separate their circumstantial elements from their essential components. A lasting contribution of Lenin’s theory is the proposal of a transformation from free competition to a rivalry between monopolies as opposed to the idea that finance capital will subjugate industrial capital. The growing need for markets of the imperialist powers and their recourse to the oppression of the underdeveloped nations is the most valuable aspect of Luxemburg’s work and not her vision of a crisis exclusively derived from the “collapse of the noncapitalist regions.”

The contradiction between the internationalization of the productive forces and the persistence of national boundaries effectively constitutes the core explanation for the great worldwide economic and military conflicts, but the forms of these conflicts have substantially changed since Bukharin’s time. Trotsky’s view of the growing polarization between oppressed and oppressor nations has survived, and so has his focus on the unfeasibility of any socialist project that is conceived in purely national terms. This process does not imply a prolonged stagnation of the productive forces, as was believed in the 1930s, but rather its opposite. What has emerged is the increasing difficulty of reconciling the intensification of production and of productivity with the spread of markets and the expansion of profits. By separating the central elements of an analysis of imperialism from the characteristics it assumed during the interwar period one can arrive at the essential theoretical core that permits us to advance a contemporary interpretation of globalization.

**KEYNESIANISM**

During the postwar period, analyzing capitalism in solely national terms once again predominated. This focus represented the continuity of the protectionist course initiated in the 1930s and, especially, the primacy of interventionist economic policies in the major nations. Keynesianism, which nurtured this trend, approaches global economic problems (trade, fluctuations, investment flows, etc.) as an extension or derivation of a national focus. Neither macroeconomic categories nor fiscal and monetary policies are conceived outside of this framework.

The limitations of this focus for an understanding of globalization are obvious, especially because the world market is interpreted as a simple
beneficiary of the “growing interdependence between nations” and not as a new site for global accumulation. The inadequacy of the Keynesian criteria for analyzing globalization is apparent also in the various schools, such as that of regulation (Boyer, 1997), that have sought to reconcile the tradition of Keynes with that of Marx. For example, the concepts “rule of accumulation” and “mode of accumulation” are restricted, by definition, to the national sphere, and the same is true of “Fordism,” “Taylorism,” and “post-Fordism.” The classic opposition between the “Austrian model” and the “Anglo-Saxon neoliberal model” also place strategic national rivalries at the center of their analysis, overlooking the new conditioned reality of globalization.

This same difficulty also underlies the Stalinist proposal of reaching socialism through the “competition between two systems.” In the same way as Keynesianism, this approach characterized the world economy as a meeting between distinct forms of accumulation struggling for supremacy. It failed to understand that the twentieth-century internationalization of the economy was not an amalgam of different national characteristics but a major new referential axis for every nation. Ignoring this reality made it possible to believe, mistakenly, that socialism could be constructed within the confines of a region, coexisting with capitalism or conquering it by the “successes achieved by the socialist bloc.”

GLOBALIZATION

During the 1970s and 1980s the analysis of globalization was undertaken by studies that tried to update the theory of imperialism, incorporating the new role of corporations now designated “transnational firms.” Michalet’s work especially served to identify the appearance of a new type of firm that by strategically developing a single internationalized management can profit from national differences in productivity and salaries (Michalet, 1976). These corporations obtain extraordinary profits by constructing a homogeneous sphere within the fractured geographical environment in which their principal firms and branches operate. They are corporations that maintain their privileged links with their national states and headquarters but adopt the world market as the reference point for their activities by establishing an unprecedented internal circulation of capital, labor, inputs, and technology.

These corporations have created a new international division of labor based on the principle of maximum extraction and realization of surplus value around themselves. They have introduced both increased uniformity and increased differentiation into the process of accumulation. On one hand, competition obliges them to increase the international distribution of their
products, processes, innovations, and forms of management. On the other hand, to maintain their huge profits they must preserve the great international differences between productivity and salaries. The study of transnational firms based on new empirical data gathered by the United Nations Center for Transnational Corporations and proceeding from innovative theoretical reinterpretations, for example, of the “product cycle” generated the field of Marxist investigations of globalization. To a great extent, the most recent analyses of globalization have distorted or denied the significance of these investigations.

The abrupt rise of the term “globalization” signified the sanctification of an idea that refers not to a specific type of economic internationalization under capitalism but to a postindustrialist stage. It is assumed that in the era of “global communication” and “global marketing” industrial capitalism is being replaced by an “information society” in which property loses all significance and is replaced by information. In this view, the dynamics of the new “social actors” bury the class struggle, the nation-state loses its importance, and the market is transformed into the undeniable master of all human actions. The purely apologetic character of this approach is obvious, beginning with the elimination from the analysis of the very idea of globalization. Its most widely accepted ideas do not go beyond a rudimentary embellishment of “deregulation,” privatization, or the “free market.”

In a critical analysis, it is necessary to avoid the neoliberal superstitions that characterize the modern period. For example, authors like Sivanandan (1997) correctly question “social exclusion,” the “marginalization” of the peripheral nations, or the “increase of inequalities,” but erroneously accept the idea of a “transnationalization of the bourgeoisie.” With this approach, globalization is identified with the emergence of a new capitalist class that is predominant and cohesive on a worldwide scale.

Advocates of this idea overlook the fact that with internationalization competitive pressure between firms increases, and so does the need to resort to the state for support to prevail in this struggle. They forget that the state structure is not weakened but reorganized on a geographical level and functionally restructured for its struggle for global hegemony.

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF PRODUCTION

The most significant characteristic of globalization in the past decades is the movement toward the internationalization of the productive process. Here is where the central differences between the current transformations and those of the first decades of the twentieth century lie. This transformation is
related to the crisis of capitalism and its reorganization since the 1970s. Along with overproduction, the decline of long-term profitability, and the disjunction between production and consumption that contributed to the current crisis, there has been a restructurin of the main branches of industry in the core nations. A central component of this new environment is an increase in the internationalization of production.

This increase can be measured by observing the great multiplication of foreign investments directly managed by the 600 firms that control a third of the world’s gross domestic product. Through subcontracting, “joint ventures,” and aid contracts, these firms have expanded their control over all the international linkages of the manufacturing process and the sale of goods and services. This is not a strategy for supplying themselves with primary products or capturing markets through the establishment of branches but the initiation of what Andreff (1996) calls the “international decomposition of the production process,” with each branch specializing in an operation that contributes to the global strategy of the company. It is for this reason that they generally place their high-quality activities in the developed countries and those of “Taylorist” type in underdeveloped ones.

Since the 1980s, the new international rivalry on the production level has caused a spectacular wave of mergers that have required reduction of costs and an increase in productivity. It has also produced an increase in the centralization of capital (in no important sector are there more than ten huge competitors operating), the formation of complexes that integrate services to industry’s requirements, and the proliferation of agreements between firms to ensure the distribution of the various goods. The substitution of the label “Made in such-and-such a country” with “Made by such-and-such a company” symbolizes this transformation. The “global factory” and the “global product” are not yet the norm, but this is the central tendency of capitalism today.

An important theoretical implication of this process is the potential transformation in the determination of prices under the law of value. A significant portion of the production undertaken in the internal space of these internationalized firms is based on the “transfer price” administered by managers who are to some extent independent of market instability. Thus, a fracture emerges in the classical process of the determination of average profit and the costs of production based on national prices and currency, contributing to a regional structuring of new monetary standards and policies regarding subsidies and tariffs.

At the same time, the internationalization of production is responsible for the dynamic acceleration of innovation in the field of information technologies. It simultaneously constitutes a great stimulus to the ongoing tech-
nological revolution and is the determinant of its major contradictions (developed in Katz, 1998). On this point, two major ideas in the Manifesto have special relevance: the characterization of the bourgeoisie as a class that “cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the means of production” and the appearance of an “epidemic of overproduction” as a consequence of this idiosyncrasy. Both phenomena are evident today. Under capitalism, the multiplication of new goods and forms of production is indissolubly linked to the production of surpluses in relation to the purchasing capacity of the population. It is for this reason that poverty, unemployment, and exploitation are increasing alongside the internationalization of the productive process. Latin America is one of the regions most affected by this transformation.

FINANCE AND COMMERCE

Some writers focus on “financial globalization” and link it with the emergence of a new “financier mode of production,” emphasize that the disproportionate expansion of credit increasingly disassociates the financial processes from the “real economy.” They maintain that financial capital subordinates industrial activities and that investment flows are fictitious, concealing operations that are purely speculative. This approach fails to recognize the methodological importance of arranging the analysis of the productive sphere hierarchically and privileging the study of the laws that operate there. The fruitful discussion that has recently emerged concerning this question (Husson, 1997; Chesnais, 1994; 1998) has been the background of the debates surrounding the “decline of U.S. imperialism” (Brenner, 1995; Malloy, 1995). On the specific level of globalization, the exclusive focus on finance tends to divorce the analysis of the “global banks” from the strategic constitution of “global firms.”

Without a doubt, the expansion of the unproductive parasitism of financiers enriched by playing the stock market or raiding indebted countries is a fundamental reality of the present crisis. In condemning this pillaging, however, we should seek to understand the capitalist logic underlying it, and to do this we should focus on the productive sphere. All the major changes in financial globalization registered in the past few years are connected to its industrial determinant. This dependency is visible even in the description of the financial transformations that, for example, Philon (1997) observes. The banking intermediary is bypassed by a direct issuing of bonds by companies, thereby circumventing the need to acquire credit for investment purposes. The increasing deregulation of banking is facilitating this type of self-financing, while the liberalization of operations—eliminating their previous segmenta-
tion by type of activity—aims to facilitate fusion and the formation of financial-industrial holdings. It is evident that the issuing of credit independent of real economic transactions exacerbates the crisis, along with the capitalist demand to halt recession and aid bankrupt firms. The dynamics of accumulation orders the entire process and limits any margin of independence achieved by finance. Furthermore, it coexists with an inverse trend of a stricter adaptation of financial movement to the industrial demands of each participating company.

A similar neglect of the centrality of the production process appears in approaches to globalization that emphasize the progressive formation of a “world economy” resulting from the successive phases of “commercial globalization” (Adda, 1996). One loses sight of the fact that the increase in international transactions in contrast to production has occurred through the adaptation of commercial legislation (primarily liberalization by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the subsequent creation of the World Trade Organization and of regional markets without internal tariffs) to the demands of the internationalization of the productive process. The epicenter of this process is the movement of inputs and goods within the same corporations, and this requires a detailed study of the changes occurring in these firms’ organization of production. The “world economy” approach has a tendency to assume that there is a continuity between the “first commercial globalization” of the sixteenth century and contemporary developments, making it difficult to perceive the specificity of today’s internationalization of production.

**DOGMAS AND SUBJECTIVISM**

Some analysts go so far as to question the very existence of globalization. They maintain that internal markets continue to predominate in relation to exports, that protectionism persists as a habitual practice, that the level of the internationalization of production is less than what is usually believed, and that capitalism’s cosmopolitanism is not new but is characteristic of the history of this social order. These ideas contain many allusions to the regulation school concerning the continuing “pull of the national space” in the contemporary period.

The data that they present in favor of these arguments are very useful in refuting the caricature of globalization created by neoliberal apologists. In opposing the image of a “completely new global world,” the dogma of the invariability of capitalism is not very promising, especially if one remembers that the *Manifesto* clarifies the particularly dynamic and changing character
of this mode of production. For this reason, instead of denying the appearance of a new economic reality, it is necessary to understand its principal tendencies. Globalization is a central characteristic of the contemporary period because it not only constitutes a source of huge profits for the principal firms but also responds to the current demands of accumulation. Unless its existence and the centrality to it of the production process are recognized it will be impossible to understand this era.

There is another approach that recognizes the importance of globalization but interprets it as primarily political and capable of being characterized as the “attack of capital on labor” (Holloway, 1998). The adherents of this point of view refuse to conceptualize it in terms of objective laws and propose to understand it by means of the class struggle alone (Bonefeld, 1998). But Marxism contextualizes the centrality of the class struggle within a framework of objective limits, circumstances, and possibilities. The Manifesto—as a political analysis of the revolutionary situation and potential of 1848—is an example of this methodology since it situates the conditions of the confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the particular framework of economic crisis. Modifying this framework is advocated by the prefaces to later editions when they declare that the document “has aged” and requires new articulations.

In contrast to the contemporary sociological style of replacing classes with various types of “actors,” it is necessary to emphasize classes and their struggle as defining phenomena of the political process. This recognition constitutes a central legacy of the Manifesto that, for example, contributes to our understanding of the nexus that occurred between the leap in globalization and the relation of forces favorable to the bourgeoisie established in the 1980s and part of the 1990s. Reducing globalization to a purely political phenomenon obfuscates an interpretation of it in its totality as a process derived from the logic and laws of capital.

WORKERS WITHOUT A COUNTRY

Economic internationalization creates very favorable objective conditions for bringing the political actions of the world’s workers together in a common program. When the Manifesto asserts that “workers are without a country” and for this reason they “act above any national differences,” it is expressing a principle that has enormous relevance today. The same pressure that requires the bourgeoisie to equip itself on a worldwide scale with political instruments, forms of management, and methods of coercion contributes to the need for workers to organize their struggles and defend their rights on an
international level. But what is a reality for the dominant class is scarcely considered a necessity for the dominated class. For a long time, corporations have been converting international (International Monetary Fund, United Nations, World Bank, World Trade Organization, and others) and regional (European Union, North American Free Trade Association, Association of South East Asian Nations, and others) organizations into “committees to administer their affairs”—the central characteristic that the *Manifesto* attributes to the modern state. Corporations are even discussing how to design a “multilateral investment accord” that will have constitutional powers to guarantee capitalist investments, property, and profits when confronted by any popular challenge in any corner of the world. In relation to the international spread of the bourgeoisie’s forms of domination, the level of organization and actual consciousness of the worker is obviously very low. This political backwardness of the exploited is not new (and is the result of a combination of political-historical factors whose analysis is beyond the scope of this article), but it has become a crucial question. All of the objective conditions exist for the globalization of the economy to serve as a point of departure for action to achieve the workers’ just demands. A response on the same level as that on which the corporations operate would produce impressive results, and therefore the major problem is how to advance workers’ political power through the organization of labor unions on an international scale. This structure must transcend the segmentation of professions, qualifications, nationality, race, ethnicity, and gender that is promoted and exacerbated by the dominant classes. In the age of “just in time” and “productive flexibility adjusted to demand,” workers have increasing capacity to assert their demands through coordinated international actions, as current struggles for workers’ rights in Europe and Latin America have begun to show.

The *Manifesto*’s call for the workers of the world to unite is its most contemporary aspect. It is a message that is not limited to the circumstances of 1848 but responds to the oppressiveness of capitalism in every period and every country. Internationalism is the pillar for a revival of the socialist project of emancipation.

**NOTE**

1. This article was first written in November 1998. For a further treatment of globalization see also Claudio Katz’s “Desequilibrios y antagonismos de la mundialización” in *Rcadidad Económica* n. 178, febrero-marzo 2001, Buenos Aires.
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Engendering Powers in Neoliberal Times in Latin America

Reflections from the Left on Feminisms and Feminisms

by

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Translated by Laurence Hallewell

The differences among the various components of the women’s movement in Latin America today are assumed to be gradually diminishing. I question this assumption here and argue that the currents known in the late 1970s as “autonomous,” “authentic,” or “radical” feminism are increasingly being mainstreamed. These branches of feminism are becoming “institutionalized,” that is, dependent on international agencies and therefore seldom critical of the reigning order (or disorder) and even going so far as to enter into alliances with governments and agencies (such as the World Bank) that support neoliberalism in Latin America. These institutionalized branches of the women’s movement, which in the 1970s accused socialist feminists of seeking utopian solutions and being hostile to the modern world, have not just been co-opted by the powers that they once criticized (such as the state and transnational capital and their agents) in their pragmatic pursuit of programs and laws of benefit to women but, in opting for fixed identities and immediate rights, distanced themselves from their original libertarian feminism. The route they have chosen has diverted the women’s movement from its most promising course, that of promoting awareness and practice through creating identities or nonidentities, combining various connections in matters of class, and thus contributing, in association with other movements, to a renewal of socialist projects. What they are risking by negotiating, in the name of a pragmatic feminism, with the authorities is the very identity of the

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women’s movement in Latin America and their practical knowledge of protest and critique.

My objectives in this left-oriented interpretation of Latin American feminism today are as follows:

First, I want to encourage reflection on the abandonment by the women’s movement—or the most visible or “official” tendencies within it—in Latin America of any critical stance vis-à-vis the neoliberal state. In the 1970s the women’s movement played an outstanding role not just in the struggle against dictatorships and the return to democracy but also in the reshaping of the left. Despite the differences among their various tendencies—radical, socialist, anarchist, and so forth (see León, 1994)—all feminists and women’s movements in those years played a part in some way or other in building a new left. They all drew attention to the many ways in which women suffered discrimination, even within the working class. They stressed the importance of the things that happened in everyday life and the connections between micro and macro levels in politics and between public and private life in the perpetration of various degrees of violence against women.

Second, I want to stress the importance of distinguishing between the various tendencies and orientations within feminism and then supporting those currents—such as socialist feminism, a feminism with a community base, and projects of social transformation—whose attack on the inequalities suffered by women is combined with attention to those other inequalities—of gender, race, and class—that affect working-class men as well. The result of such support would be a feminism that was simultaneously movement-based and class-based (i.e., one concerned with the working class) and had the flexibility to create strategies and tactics for social movements that excluded generic and “natural” references to women and men (see Castro and Lutjens, 1998; Therborn, 1995). In Latin America, we find such an approach being adopted (albeit hesitantly) in community-based organizations, small advocacy-oriented nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), entities with a Marxist-feminist or emancipatory orientation, the women’s sections of some trade unions and political parties, and various social movements (for Brazil, see Abramovay and Castro, 1998).

I begin by analyzing the living conditions of women in Brazil and the effects of neoliberal policies. I go on to provide brief glimpses of the trajectory of the women’s movement in Latin America, suggesting the possibilities for a critical approach to neoliberalism that exist in a Marxist-oriented feminism and in community-based organizations and trade unions (see Castro and Lutjens, 1998; Abramovay and Castro, 1998).
A MILITANT FEMINIST CRITIQUE

At the end of the 1970s, the autonomous wing of the Latin American feminist movement was looked upon as “the left wing of the left” for defending libertarian positions not just for the benefit of women but as an attack on the authorities and the stereotypes or imposed identities that helped perpetuate discrimination against women, blacks, homosexuals, and the poor by a variety of agents—for example, the state, the family, political parties, and trade unions, whether of the right or of the left. The feminism that called itself “autonomous,” “authentic,” or “radical” derived in part from organizations of the conventional left simply because many feminists were or had been active in left-wing organizations. But this variety of feminism insisted in principle on the autonomy of the women’s movement in relation to the parties and unions on the left, which it criticized for their authoritarianism, hierarchy, and failure to recognize the links between public and private life. Conspicuous among the disagreements between feminists and left-wing parties in Latin America that led to heated polemics in the 1980s were whether radical groups might act as vanguards, advancing beyond party policy, the extent to which infrastructure and superstructure might be separated, and the dichotomy between use value and exchange value. A particular quarrel was over the way the left would set up hierarchies of scale between conflicts and contradictions, a principle that led to the treatment of “domestic” violence and discrimination based on race or sexual behavior as mere “secondary contradictions.”

The various currents of feminism, but especially the radical feminists, contributed to a reform of the left through their insistence that the dynamic of subjectivity and of day-to-day life was important enough to become a political topic. Radical feminists were already critical of the Marxist wing of feminism, objecting to its stress on the role of economic policies in perpetuating sexual discrimination and its practice of double militancy (Marxist feminists being at the same time members of their political parties or trade unions and of autonomous bodies of the feminist movement). The radicals argued that the Marxist feminists’ attempts to associate analyses on sexuality, the value of domestic work, and relationships between men and women, among other topics, with economic factors often led to Manichaean associations that attributed only secondary importance to the division of power, pleasure, and work according to gender to the advantage of men. Marxist feminists and many of the conventional organizations of the Latin American left have in fact been broadening their agendas and reflecting critically on their practices.
Although to a lesser extent than adherents of so-called authentic feminism, they have been paying more attention to the material impact of symbols, fantasies, personalities, and subjective considerations and individual situations. They have, however, been less ready in debates on economic, political, and cultural questions to admit links between the macro and the micro level—to consider the repercussions at the level of the individual and daily life (including the affective and sexual) of the perverse results of the current phase of capitalism, in which the lives of the men and women of the working classes are being impacted subjectively and objectively by unemployment and social deterioration.

The currents of feminism that were once called “autonomous” or “radical” because of their criticism of the left for its authoritarianism, economic determinism, and so forth are nowadays increasingly considered less so because of their dependence (following the model of the NGOs) on the resources of international agencies and partnership with governments in the competition for funds and the effort to conform to the generalized language of the documents produced by United Nations conferences. Ambiguity as to its identification as a critical social movement also extends to what used to be called “socialist” or emancipatory feminism and is now known as “feminism with a class-conscious orientation.” This current has become increasingly timid and limited in its struggle for rights and for immediate equality and in its support for working men and women in their fight against the effects of capitalism in its global and neoliberal phase—particularly as regards unemployment and various forms of violence. Nevertheless, this is the current with the best chance of contributing to a united front against neoliberalism in Latin America (see Castro and Lutjens, 1998). Feminist academics who have discussed the role of Latin American feminism in these times of globalization include, among others, Álvarez (1998), León (1994), Jaquette (1994), and Vargas (1994).

At the Seventh Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Conference in Cartagena, Chile, November 23-29, 1996, some 650 women (Álvarez, 1998; León, 1997) discussed the autonomy of the feminist movement, its political definition, problems of representation (e.g., women and organizations of the popular sectors each trying to speak for the other), ethics, dependency on external resources, and, indirectly, the contradictions between seeking power through institutionalization—such as through the NGO model—and the loss of dynamism and of the capacity for independent criticism that one would expect from a social movement. León (1997: 28) summarized the polemics that divided conference participants as follows:
The debate over their political position concerned the need to adopt a more definite position against the neoliberal model and on interaction with the state, multilateral agencies, and organs of cooperation. While, as Mexico’s Ximena Bedregal pointed out, “an enormous wave of political moderation is affecting the feminist movement,” with important sectors “looking for a chance of legitimacy within the established order,” quite a substantial part of the movement is seeking to reassert autonomy as a necessary basis to build upon.

At the center of the discussions was the need to reaffirm the character of feminism as a social movement, differentiating it from NGOs, most of which have taken up as their central challenge the possibility of direct negotiation with the powers-that-be in the hope of securing input into the formulation of public and international policies.

I do not pretend to judge political positions; this is neither an attack nor a prescription for a solution. I simply want to share concerns. It is important and necessary to consider the role of various types of feminism, investments in services to specific groups, laws for equality, “affirmative action,” and attempts to implement the resolutions of the United Nations conferences of the 1980-1990 period. But my review of the situation makes me uneasy about the lack of commitment in another direction as well, that is, toward feminism’s potential as a liberating ideal, a utopia, a perspective concerned not just with defending identities and differences but also with creating new identities, including combinations of identities and nonidentities or “de-identification” (Butler, 1992:4)—forms of existing openly, of being created in the free exercise of creativity and through critical mobilization and the “rearticulation of democratic contestation,” without being limited to individualized sexual differences. Part of such a concern with de-identifications would be a socialist position, but this would be a socialism reshaped by the concept of class in such matters as race, gender, and the recognition of various sexual preferences—that is, a humanist and liberating socialism.

I am also unhappy with feminism’s ineffectiveness and its divisions, especially with regard to public policy and doing something in the here and now to counteract the worsening of working-class living conditions. The statistics on income, maternal deaths, and other indications of living standards do not suggest that the strategy of negotiating with neoliberal governments has meant gains for all women, especially when one looks at them not just by gender but also by income level and racial and ethnic classification and when indications in the health sector are taken into account. At the same time, women cannot struggle effectively to secure their rights when their energies have to be diverted into the fight to survive and to keep their jobs.
WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT, HEALTH, AND TRADE-UNION EXPERIENCE

The Brazilian government promotes the idea that economic modernization depends wholly on such neoliberal measures as taking away what the working class has won in the past, reducing investment in social services and policies, controlling the trade unions, repressing social movements such as those of the landless peasants and the homeless, making concessions to foreign capital in exporting and investing, supporting finance capital, pursuing the privatization of state-run enterprises (many of which are both profitable and of strategic importance), emphasizing the control of inflation at the expense of social investment, and returning to the model of the minimal state, abandoning its role as the regulator of social relations between capital and labor and the guardian of social well-being (see Fiori, 1997; Sader, 1995).

The Brazilian government, through its rhetoric and its programs, presents itself as the champion of women and blacks, with a human rights policy (see Brazil, Presidency of the Republic, 1996) that overlooks not just the rights of workers but also discrimination against homosexuals. Under Fernando Henrique Cardoso, various mixed commissions, with representatives of NGOs and of government, have been established with regard to identity and other topics. Official speeches have accorded pride of place to the law and affirmative action in defending and promoting the interests of women and blacks. This stance and the measures that have resulted have in fact had some positive effects, especially through the social visibility they have conferred on historically neglected problems related to the racist and sexist components of Brazilian culture. Structurally, however, the adoption of a development model that reinforces inequalities has blocked the expansion and enjoyment of these rights. The contradiction between a progressive discourse and a social dynamic that works to increase poverty without providing social security generates a perverse and ambiguous process. NGOs and even some black and feminist activists are confused by the official speeches and the measures, most of which are of limited application and selective as to those they benefit. The apparent paradox is that while women and blacks have been steadily gaining rights in law, the everyday reality is that they still fare badly and are conspicuous, for example, among the unemployed and the poorly paid.

In 1995, around 30 percent of the Brazilian population were earning less than the legal minimum wage (US$150 a month). The country’s best-paid women in 1990 were earning an average of 3 to 4 reais an hour, while men in similar jobs were getting 4 to 6 reais. Black women in 1990 were earning on average twice the legal minimum, while white women were earning four times the minimum. Black men were getting three and a half times the
minimum wage, but white men were getting seven and a half times it (data in Lavinias and Pereira de Melo, 1996). Women in urban areas, in 1995, were earning on average 45 percent less than men in the same ethnic groups. Gender differences in income were observed even among those with higher education, and, indeed, the difference in incomes between women of different ethnic or racial groups increased with their length of education, showing that race is a selective factor throughout the labor market.

Analyses of recent unemployment patterns in Brazil’s urban areas have shown that the situation of women in the labor market is affected not only by general tendencies that affect men too but also by their specific gender profile. According to Lavinias et al. (1998a),

Although, until the end of the 1980s, female unemployment rates were observed to reflect the male unemployment curve (with 3 percent to 4 percent difference between the two sexes), there has been in more recent years a degree of disconnection, with a tendency for female unemployment to increase disproportionately. Data for urban areas from the PNAD [Pesquisa Nacional de Amostra Domiciliar—the National Household Sample Inquiry] of 1995 reveal that the level of urban unemployment is 6 percent for men and 8.5 percent for women.

Lavinias et al. (1998b) show that it was the women with the least education who experienced increasing unemployment in the 1991-1997 period. The group best protected against unemployment in that period was that of males with higher education.

Another area indicative of the quality of life of the population is health, and it is precisely in this area that Brazilian women’s organizations have been most successful in promoting a form of feminism that is concerned with the well-being of the whole population, particularly the poor and women of the lower classes. It is this feminism that has been most critical of the effects of neoliberalism on living conditions for both men and women. Maternal deaths in Brazil are among the highest in Latin America: 200 for every 100,000 live births. The principal causes of such deaths are circulatory problems and uterine cancer, reflecting a lack of diagnostic testing and medication at an early stage. Women’s groups have denounced the poor quality of the health care available to those on low incomes and the lack of attention to women’s reproductive rights as the primary reasons for this situation (Lavinias and Pereira de Melo, 1996). They have called attention to the recent increase of deaths in childbirth among women under 25 (31 percent of all maternal deaths in 1980 and 35 percent in 1987). A United Nations report on human development in Brazil (UNDP and IPEA, 1996) points out that excessive blood loss during labor, birth, or confinement accounts for 18 percent of the total of maternal
deaths, an indication of the poor quality of health services. NGOs concerned with women estimate that about 10 percent of maternal deaths arise from induced abortion or attempts at such abortion and the lack of medical intervention that results from its illegality. They estimate that there were 1,890,000 clandestine abortions in Brazil in 1996 (UBM, 1996).

Research by both women’s organizations and bank employees’ and supermarket employees’ trade unions have called attention to the increase in repetitive stress syndrome, particularly among women workers. According to the World Health Organization and the International Labor Organization, this syndrome is typical of occupations involving finger movements such as those needed to operate computers and cash registers but is also associated with any repetitive work and aggravated by stress, tension, and worry. Feelings of insecurity contribute to these illnesses, as do overworked muscles, long workdays, and a lack of work breaks (Menecucci de Oliveira, 1998). Various bodies in civil society have warned that repetitive stress injuries have acquired the character of an epidemic, being responsible for almost 70 percent of the cases of disability due to occupational disease in Brazil (an official figure that is probably an underestimate). In the case of women, the increase in repetitive stress injuries is also associated with their having housework responsibilities over and above their full-time employment. Repetitive stress disorders can be considered a symbol of the way the bodies of men and women are exploited in the process of making labor more flexible and efficient. “In the past 20 years in Brazil, some 29 million work-related accidents were recorded, with women accounting for 16 to 17 percent. The rate has grown notably since 1980, with women now featured in 20 percent and repetitive stress injuries playing a basic role in this change” (Menecucci de Oliveira, 1998: 1). Concern over health matters has been growing in the women’s movement in Brazil, and a feminist health network with international connections has been formed. Feminist voices endorse the critique of neoliberalism, the worsening of health services, and the effects of work processes and fear of unemployment on the daily lives of men and women. In fact, many works by feminist researchers indicate links between work outside the home, unemployment, worries about economic survival, the burden of housework, and a deterioration in the living conditions of workers, male and female (see, e.g., Menecucci de Oliveira, 1998; Lavínas and Pereira de Melo, 1996).

The experience of women trade unionists in the city of Salvador, Bahia, illustrates the devastating effects of the modern globalized economy and the political microculture on the possibility of a feminist and class-based counterculture that might link erotic-aesthetic-ethical language with a class critique of management—that is, on the engendering of alternative feminisms. After five years of research and collaboration with the women’s department
of the bank employees’ union, I reported (Castro, 1995) that women members had been getting the union’s council to hold debates on sexuality, love, masculine sensibility, and domestic violence. The *piqueteiras*—the women activists in the union—were also introducing workshops on their topics and repeatedly raising with the union leaders (all male) the questions of the sexual division of power, sexual harassment, and forms of social relations in respect to gender. They wanted to know why male union members should constitute the leadership and female members the rank and file, a sexual division evident not just in the hierarchical gap between the women on the picket line and the *palanqueiros* (union leaders and spokesmen) but in many other ways, including their role in various forms of protest. This union collaborated with a local branch of the gay movement to arrange three homosexual weddings in 1993 and held workshops on working-class homophobia. Its departments of culture and women’s affairs published a newspaper, *Mulher em Movimento*, in which humor, irony, and criticism of the state were mixed with offers of help in fighting sexual harassment and discrimination in banks. The women unionists organized a carnival band that became celebrated throughout Salvador for its allegorical critique of social history and customs. During a parade of the “shirtless” (i.e., the impoverished) held to publicize a strike that had been going on for a fortnight without any mention in the media, it was the unrestrained irreverence of the women participants, pulling off their tops, that broke the press’s silence. In 1991 the trade union’s meeting hall was renamed in honor of Raul Seixas, a musician of anarchist views who had translated the “International” as “Long Live the Alternative Society.” “The Communist Party of Brazil [the party represented by the union’s leadership] really lets its hair down,” commented political adversaries. In demonstrations held to demand the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello, drums accompanied the women’s shouts of “love, desire, beans: the people want to eat/screw.”

In under two years, however, the membership of the bank employees’ union in Salvador was reduced through layoffs by an estimated 40 percent. All the active workers in the women’s affairs and culture departments of the union who had not been laid off were now working in other departments, mobilizing resistance to the effects of restructuring in the financial sector, unemployment, and the weakness of workers in the relations between capital, the state, and labor. Cultural activities were reduced to arranging weekend soccer games, and there were no longer any discussions of the government’s efforts at down-sizing or plans for local demonstrations. The only activity not directed toward pure economic survival and the defense of wage rates was the health program on repetitive stress disorders, which are “almost endemic” among bank employees.
The signs in some Brazilian trade unions of a retreat from gains in the area of the discussion and implementation of practices with regard to gender are not due to the imposition of “masculine” or “patriarchal” power, but this is not to deny the increase in machismo in environments such as the unions and political parties. The way the women in the bank employees’ union of Bahia have lost ground—not so much in having questions of gender included as in getting them acted upon—indicates the subtle connections between political economy and a culture of fixed identities and stereotyping. In other words, we have to deal with the way culture and economic policies are intertwined while still keeping them separate and recognizing the way economic factors restrict how far we can go in developing alternative cultures of identity such as a class-based feminism.

A LEFTIST APPROACH

Being on the political left is complicated by the variety of directions we may choose for our immediate goals, but it is a position sustained as much by a rejection of what we experience in our present-day lives as by the assertion of our ultimate objective, a postcapitalist paradise. “Cultural unease”—“the feeling of weariness that is so important a part of our contemporary mental structure” (Heilbroner, 1993: 110)—is not a natural attribute of the left but has many sources. It is also hallowed in those wakes in which the participants chant their anticipatory dirge for the death foretold, the end of history and the class struggle—usually wakes without a corpse or in which no one notices changes in the corpse that show it to be still alive. But if we redirect our gaze beyond the relationships of capital and labor in production units or the attainment of a specific type of capitalism (the post-Fordian model) to the quality of workers’ lives, the pattern of consumption of symbols and images, and the fact that most workers in Latin America are still in the so-called informal economy, then we come to questions of culture, power relations, and the many forms of social exclusion. There has been an increase in social and cultural situations and relationships that have the political potential to fragment and diversify conflicts. The most radical proposals of such movements as the radical and emancipatory feminism of the 1970s and those concerned with race or ethnicity reject the logic of the market in favor of ethical and aesthetic values concerned with social justice. Whether in putting theory into practice, enduring the prosaic routine of day-to-day survival, or joining rival tribes (a political party, a trade union, or a social movement), being on the left nowadays is a bit like accepting the challenge of the Sphinx: “Decipher me or I
shall devour thee.” As the Sphinx suggested, one’s gait may change, but one remains human.

Being on the left nowadays is above all being aware of the way things change over time. The rhythm of modernity has not just altered but speeded up. Being on the left today is, in a sense, an act of mourning—recalling the past critically, acknowledging where we went wrong, and looking back wistfully on what we have lost. We increasingly use our experiences in the game of constructing identities and alternatives that are plural but remain united in repudiating the powers-that-be. For a new era, a new way of being on the left, we need a new consciousness. We need to move away from fixed positions, to “step out of the old boxes” (Giddens, 1990), to uncover connections between the global and the local. This awareness concerns both the limits of the nation-state and the new economic powers and the extent to which we can return to the parochial in our obsession with nationally and religiously particularized identities. I call the latter identities “self-contained” to differentiate them from what might be called “deserialized” (Guattari, 1990), mobile, collective identities. The assertion and discussion of such identities or nonidentities—based on ethical mobilization, recognizing otherness, asserting solidarity, and opposing cruelty and superseding identities that derive from a narcissistic obsession with essential particularities such as the navel gazing indulged in by the institutionalized versions of some of our new social movements—is one of the potentialities or opportunities of our time.

Can we leave history aside and stop identifying ourselves by ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, or some other such category? As I have argued elsewhere (Castro, 1993), retaining such categories as class, ethnicity, or gender is a zero-sum game. Instead, we should have correlations of powers, divided or multiplied depending on the circumstances, with different outcomes related to projects of emancipation—projects that transcend identity in which our discussions and our efforts are concerned with the human in each category.


The dynamic of the various organizations of the feminist movement at the end of the 1970s was characterized by their having as their central concern discussion groups on the struggle against dictatorship. The role of women’s organizations in the process of the return to democracy was generally recognized at the time (Jaquette, 1994). Many of these organizations have gradually abandoned their “intimate” tone and their public demonstrations against
economic policies. Their preference for greater formality and administrative complexity led them in the 1980s to structure themselves as NGOs, either for services or for advocacy. Many of these were no longer concerned with popular participation and public discussion but concentrated on supplying experts to advise working-class women and their movements, with emphasis on empowerment from the perspective of gender. They also began to make lobbying for the inclusion of women in the various spheres of public life their main concern. According to some interpretations of this development, the NGO model differs from that of the social movement of the 1970s in having given up any attempt to put pressure on the powers—the state in particular—by demonstrations and protests. Some writers consider the “social” approach to have been the distinctive keynote of a “second wave” of Latin American feminism in the period after 1975 (Chinchila, 1992; Vargas, 1994). According to Sternbach et al. (1992:74), “Unlike radical North-American feminists, the Latin Americans maintained their commitment to a radical change in the social relationships of production and reproduction at the same time as they continued struggling against sexism within the left.”

Feminists have been holding regular conferences in Latin America every other year since 1981. Some of the themes of these conferences suggest a regular reiteration of the uniqueness of feminism as a movement. In the first half of the 1980s this stance signified a complete break with the characteristic practices, theories, and politics of the left. In the 1996 conference (in Cartagena) the autonomy of the feminist movement—its political definition and the problems resulting from its having to depend on outside sources—was discussed once again. The conference was dominated by the types of feminism known in the 1970s as autonomous, radical, or authentic and pure, with their love affair with the powers on the right and their failure to confront neoliberalism. The odd thing is that in the discussion of autonomy the target of critics was no longer the left, now on the decline with the “end of real socialism,” but the movement’s autonomy in relation to the agents of contemporary capitalism and whether it should be associated with the negotiations conducted in preparation for the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing.

By the time of the Cartagena conference it was no longer necessary to be concerned, as the earlier meetings had been, about visibility and legitimacy. These had been achieved at the international level by the media’s coverage of the Beijing conference, a recognition of the power of a movement that had achieved a record attendance for a United Nations conference—35,000. Power had also been one of the central themes among the feminist programs set out in Beijing, using a neologism that is now part of the feminist vocabulary: “empowerment.” The question of power had become a central concern.
The enemy was no longer the left parties and unions, and the confrontations during the Cartagena meeting between yesterday’s “autonomous feminists” and those of today had nothing sisterly about them (see León, 1997; Álvarez, 1998).

The defense of pacts, alliances, and partnerships with institutions like the World Bank was based on a concept of citizenship that made no reference to the capitalist system or the existence of social classes. Virginia Vargas, considered the leader of the tendency associated with “institutionalization” (quoted by León, 1997: 29), recognized that

many of our struggles and proposals are aimed at a reconciliation with the status quo without appearing to undermine its basic assumptions. This is appropriate because it allows us to seek an equality in basic rights that will benefit the position of women through the whole of society. And this is a fundamental objective because it asserts a clear level of justice in the here and now for the great majority of women, thus broadening our democracy and strengthening feminine citizenship.

Margarita Pisano, a Chilean, speaking for the “autonomous” tendency, implicitly rejected the consequences of Vargas’s position as seeking an abstract “feminine citizenship” without regard to the inequalities and differences among women. However, her observation, identifying patriarchy as the system of discrimination against women par excellence, suggests that for these women discussion of social classes would be secondary. Pisano (quoted in León, 1997: 30) criticized the generic orientation toward pacts and alliances:

One cannot negotiate with those who go against the basic principles of feminism, even when they happen to be other women. I will not collaborate politically with racist or homophobic women, with those who fail to defend a woman’s body and her right to abortion, or with those who support the neoliberal model, because the political aim of such women destroys and negotiates away any chance for us of a civilized change. For this reason, I call for, as our priority, a pact among all women who are sustained by a system of ideals and ethical proposals and who, above all, have as their political aim the deconstruction of patriarchy.

León points out that besides these two groups there were others aligned with neither, such as socialist feminists, trade unionists, feminists connected with political parties, black feminists, and Native American feminists.

Such polemics and name-calling among feminists in Latin America support my thesis that there are various types of feminism, not all of which are necessarily on the left and critical of the existing economic order. These new
polemics call into question the idea of a homogeneous feminism or “second wave” (see, e.g., León, 1994; Álvarez, 1998). I argue that our dynamic times have seen the re-creation of various waves, various feminisms, characterized by their vagueness of definition and their diversity.

**MARXIST FEMINISM—A TIMID PROMISE**

During the 1980s, criticism of feminists with a double commitment (to a political party or a trade union as well as to the movement) and the emphasis on autonomy gradually became less rigid, with an increasing appreciation of the importance of feminists in fostering changes in practice and outlook in such organizations. It is significant, for example, that in June 1998 one of the largest trade-union confederations in Latin America, the Confederação de Trabalhadores Rurais (Federation of Agricultural Workers—CONTAG), with some 450,000 members, held a national congress in Brasília with the title “Congress of Rural Working Men and Women.” Discrimination persists, however, against currents such as the Marxist-oriented feminists. This discrimination has been evident in the various feminist conferences, where there has been no recognition of Marxist feminism’s increasing efforts to link its class-based approach and its critique of capitalist economic policy to concerns with such questions as sexual rights, reproductive rights, and domestic violence. In the statements of those feminists who call themselves “authentic” it is common to find intolerance of currents that seek to combine feminism with their other concerns. Vargas (1994), for instance, recognizes the risk of a degree of exclusion in a concentration on an “essential feminism” but nevertheless contributes to a discourse of exclusion when, describing the history of feminism in Peru, she denies socialist feminists their identity as feminists, deriding them as mere “appendages of political parties” rather than as a group trying to combine its militancy with a political outlook and one that does not necessarily sacrifice its autonomy or the search for other ways of being on the political left.

Various feminist organizations in a number of countries still consider themselves socialist feminists. Some have gained a degree of popular support and influence in the women’s movement (see, e.g., the writers of the emancipatory feminist current in the journal *Presença da Mulher*, published since 1987 by the União Brasileira de Mulheres [Brazilian Union of Women—UBM]; see also Chinchilla, 1992, on Marxist feminism in Latin America in the 1980s). Articles with a Marxist feminist slant are, however, rare in the Latin American literature. Women who call themselves Marxist feminists have had little success in creating a Latin American network. They
confront organizational and financial problems, especially because many of them are engaged in various forms of organizational work with political parties and trade unions whose priorities are determined by the dynamic of their confrontation with neoliberal politics. At the same time, in contrast to other currents within feminism they cannot expect help or financial assistance from international agencies, although some agencies, particularly those based in Europe and connected with progressive organizations such as the Green party, do not base their financial support on ideological considerations.

Marxist feminists, socialist feminists, and others who work among ordinary people—that is, leftist feminists—are nevertheless playing a basic role in the construction of a new left, insisting on internal democracy and pluralism and giving priority to working with grassroots community organizations. They have connections with opposition political parties such as the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ party—PT) and the Partido Comunista do Brasil (Communist Party of Brazil—PcdobB). Some are active in parliament, others in trade unions, local town councils controlled by the opposition, or organizations of landless peasants and the homeless. Many are also leaders of small and active NGOs, of social movements like those of blacks, and in community-based organizations, such as those of the women’s movement.

Feminisms and Feminisms
In the Engendering of Powers

Feminism in its origin bears both the stamp of the left and a critical understanding of how the left has functioned—of the incompatibility between the range of subjects in its history and the recognition as a subject of history (or of another history yet to be written) of the excluded, the oppressed, and those who live by their labor. But whereas the most radical utopia, that of a humanist socialism, would have to deal with class, race, gender, sexual preference, and other demarcations that have led to discrimination and social injustice, some forms of feminism are fixed at the halfway stage, concerned only with rights in the narrow liberal sense. With the institutionalization of feminism as a means to secure rights for women, to obtain an equality concerned with nothing beyond gender or sex, it has to engage the powers-that-be in partnership and dialogue. On this level, it becomes difficult to relate to the other (the powers) while maintaining one’s own identity as the “non-other,” the counterpower.

I have referred only tangentially to pieces of the thematic mosaic for a leftist reading of feminism. There is, however, a need to discuss the concepts
used indiscriminately in the works of different schools of feminism that muddle the distinctions between different worldviews and projects. Recognizing that each really deserves detailed treatment, I summarize these as follows: (1) the concept that there is symbiosis but no fusion between the terms “woman,” “gender,” and “feminism” and that each of these has a valid status when looked at from a class perspective and one that is concerned with both women’s interests (with respect for their diversity, taking into account race, ethnicity, sexual preference, and other identities) and a questioning of the social relations between the sexes and the gender system; and (2) the idea that developing the concept of gender runs the risk of making it static, codifying social relations and positions. The manuals on gender of international agencies and some NGOs often omit to mention that this is a process that develops its significance through a dialectic and so does not always have the same meaning in different cultures.

Engendering implies changes, challenges, and questions. The concept of the feminine has to be found within that of being human. Gender discourse must be linked with other discourses on ending oppression and with other ways of asserting individuality. In the same line of reasoning, it is important to recognize that the institutionalization of feminism in the NGOs—where gender is dealt with as a question of status in relation to that of men, as a game of the differences between the sexes—does not exhaust the possibilities of feminism. On the contrary, it fails to fulfill the greater promise of feminism as the practice of criticism of the powers-that-be, the promise of feminism as consciousness/power.

These reflections are linked with a concern about the meaning for us of this institutionalization of feminism and of the discourse on women and gender. Suddenly, gender and feminism have ceased to be adversaries of the authorities and have become their darlings, the subject of official speeches, policies, and statistics—things that smack of authoritarianism and social perversity as far as the living conditions of the poor and the working class are concerned. In the case of Brazil, it is difficult to remain on critical alert in the face of such ambiguity and conceptual distortions. Everyone is talking about human rights and participation, for example, and paying lip service to the importance of women’s rights, and there are programs and specific laws that are of benefit to women in certain ways. But we have to remember that the very president who signs into law a human rights program (see Brazil, Presidency of the Republic, 1996) consistent with all the latest concerns of international agencies and public opinion regarding diversity and the rights to individual identities is the head of a neoliberal government. And that government has, through unemployment, a worsening of the living conditions of poor women in Brazil, and an assault on the unions and other forms of organized
labor, contributed to the increase in various forms of violence, including domestic violence, destroying the conditions that would foster respect for difference through a creative sexuality.

Since the late 1980s, feminism in Latin America has become more generally accepted or at least more visible, but, succumbing to the attractions of a pragmatic approach, it has been counting less on “de-identification” than on a search for new identities shaped by emancipatory utopias. The resulting rivalries have affected our behavior and social relations; we feminists are becoming increasingly “macho” toward each other, especially when it is a question of competing for funds from international agencies or for academic status or even our public image. In the 1970s we worried about giving priority to the debate on social class, lest this undermine what was essential to feminism—its individualism. Today, however, if feminism does not concern itself with social class it will lose the lawbreaking lightness of play and the erraticness of the erotic, becoming just an impotent element of official discourse. And this domestication will not have been imposed on us by patriarchy, at least not without our complicity.

Institutionalized feminism, the sort of feminism welcomed in the environment of the United Nations and adopted by international agencies and by governments of varying degrees of authoritarianism and exclusivity, does have the merit of protesting (even if only rhetorically) against violence toward women as human beings and publicizing our demands for equality and special treatment. However, when social movements that have been known for their spontaneity, flexibility, and democracy and the opportunity they have provided for grassroots participation and direct action become institutionalized they do not thereby become a new “Third Estate,” an element of popular representation within the existing power structure. They may become types of power, dependent on funding from international agencies, tending toward bureaucratic rigidity, and competing with one another. Like other institutions they are vulnerable to all the vices of bureaucracies, including the use of their power for private ends. Recognizing these risks is not, however, to deny that the NGOs’ experience in group advocacy and action within civil society is important. They must be looked at on a case-by-case basis, avoiding generalizations: there are NGOs and NGOs.

The feminism that is concerned with legal rights—with representation of women in civil society—is important, but it is only as one agent of feminism. Socialist feminism—the “nucleus of the dream” to which Marcuse (1974) referred—characterized by its attack on the productive ethic of the market and an unrepressed sensuality oriented toward pleasure is today just a nostalgic reminder of the flower children. We are losing both the bread and the circuses.
The feminism of the 1970s was severe in its criticism of the left, and this contributed to a reevaluation by the left of its thought and political action. But this feminism in its institutionalized version is becoming too soft on the right—on neoconservatism and neoliberal policies. The pursuit of financial resources from the international agencies contributes indirectly to the silence of many NGOs and of academic feminists regarding the modus operandi of some international agencies—the way in which they precodify a “gender-based perspective” and their choice of priority areas. Differences are played down, and everyone sings the same tune.

Much is being written by feminists today about freedom, subjectivity, and technologies of sexuality. But, paradoxically, we are so dominated by the needs imposed on us in the globalized political economy, supported by objective acts of violence, that we have little opportunity for erotic, aesthetic, or ethical experience and are deprived of the possibility of a micropolitics of de-identification. Can it be that we feminists are becoming what Souza Santos (1994: 84) calls “prisoners of the great trap that modernity has sprung for us: the incessant transformation of emancipatory energies into regulatory energies”?

The liberal option of “giving capitalism a human face” is wearing thin: witness the persistence if not the increase of social inequality in Latin America. This continues to be a challenge for feminism, cutting across analyses by class, gender, or race, among other factors. How can we give it this “human face” without ignoring the real-life situation of so many women and men—without abdicating, in a search for immediate victories on a narrow front, the ultimate aim of building a more humane society through a socialism based on class consciousness and mass movements (Therborn, 1995), enriched and colored by the denial of multiple subalternities and therefore radical and socially committed?

NOTES

1. “Lauretis (1994), a feminist writer whose subjects are images, gender, and the cinema, looks at things as engendered spaces. She criticizes the cultural accommodation made by those varieties of feminism that anchor themselves in the concept of gender as a social construct, losing sight of the dynamic, and become obsessed with appearances. Their one-track minds emphasize sexual differences, accept man, a universal, as their parameter, and, in the discourse on sexuality, never question heterosexuality. Lauretis proposes a possible radical epistemology. Feminism would be built by engendering itself not only through sexual differences but also through relationships of race and class. It would become ‘a many-faceted subject, rather than a single-sided one, and would embrace contradictions instead of just being divided’ (Lauretis 1994: 208)” (Castro, 1997: 159).
As for nonidentities and “de-identifications,” the basic references are Eagleton (1990) and Butler (1992). These writers also point to the possible subversive effects of particular concrete situations when identities are combined and do not conform to fixed ideas. According to Eagleton (1990:414, quoted by Castro, 1997: 158), a radical policy would require “a refutation of what Raymond Williams has called ‘militant particularism’—of those currently categorized as the ‘other’—women, foreigners, homosexuals [I would add blacks, male and female]—who are happy to be just recognized for what they are. But what is it ‘to be’ a woman, a homosexual, an Irishman? In fact it is important to recognize that excluded groups develop a certain style, values, life experiences, which suggest a form of political criticism and which demand the right of free expression. There is a political question lying in the demand for rights equal to those enjoyed by others in the discovery of one’s potential, rather than in simply assuming some pre-molded identity, whose only peculiarity would be in ceasing to be oppressed. All reactive identities are in part the result of oppression, and also of resistance to that oppression, which makes it difficult just to stop being whatever one is. The privilege of the oppressor is his privilege of deciding what he wants to be. And it is precisely that privilege that the oppressed should insist on for themselves.”

3. The text of this section was originally drafted for Castro and Lutjens (1998).

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Crisis and Agrarian Protest in Argentina

The Movimiento Mujeres Agropecuarias en Lucha

by

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Translated by Carlos Pérez

The Movimiento Mujeres Agropecuarias en Lucha (Agricultural Women in Struggle Movement—MML) is an agrarian movement led by women that emerged in Argentina in the mid-1990s (Giarracca and Teubal, 1997). Developing in a region noted for grain and cattle exports that borders the rich pampas, the movement emerged from the spontaneous actions of a group of farmers against the banks’ auctioning of their land and agricultural machinery to collect their debts. Lucy de Cornelis, the wife of an indebted farmer, convinced that her family’s debt was unjust, sent out a radio message calling for a meeting with other farmers who were in a similar situation, and those who responded to her message were women. These women stopped the auctioning of her property and that of many others with prayers and song and by persuading the potential buyers of its injustice. Since their first action in September 1995, the women have organized themselves on a national level and introduced the issue of debt and the potential disappearance of Argentina’s small and medium-sized agricultural producers into the national political discourse.

Bursting onto the scene with novel tactics such as obstructing legal action, the movement adopted a discourse that has tended to become radical and demonstrated its discontinuity with traditional agrarian social protest actions.
and established new alliances between the women’s movement and the movements of the “new agrarian protest” (Giarracca and Gras, 2001). That it went beyond confrontation to sustained collective action indicates that it is capable of becoming a social movement or part of one by uniting the protests of the rural world with those of the women’s movement. Charles Tilly (1986) characterizes “confrontation” as discontinuous collective action in one’s own interest. The MML has attempted to create a new social subject by identifying new meanings that transcend the mere struggle for a particular demand, putting an end to the rural auctions, and call attention to a national cultural problem—whether it is possible to continue to live in the countryside as one’s parents and grandparents did. In other words, the issue is the survival or extinction of the capitalized family farm, with all of the cultural consequences this question implies. These characteristics would have allowed us to analyze the MML as a “new social movement,” but instead we have tried to understand it in terms of collective action. As Melucci (1984) points out, we need to guard against the tendency to see unity in the very places that should be examined to determine whether unity exists.

The empowerment of the MML was made possible by the creation of social networks. The critical socioeconomic circumstances that the agricultural sector suffers (loss of land, absence of the resources to move) frame the movement’s actions and impose concrete limits on them. It has halted more than 500 court-ordered auctions either directly or indirectly, by legally petitioning for the nullification of the court-ordered action. Since its initial actions, its visibility has increased considerably through demonstrations and the use of the mass media. After the highly visible initial emergency period there was a latency period (Melucci, 1984) of reinforcing solidarity and creating new rules for shared practice. During this period, the women organized networks that would reinforce their message. The MML today has legal status that empowers it as a farmer’s union, an increased presence on the national level, and a method that is identified with it throughout the country. Furthermore, it is recognized as an important actor in the national agrarian movement, traditionally composed of men.

The organization’s empowerment emerged from the social practices introduced by its leaders, among them consolidating its territorial expansion through communication with women farmers all over the country and working within national and international networks of farmers struggling for similar causes. Territorial expansion did not necessarily empower the MML as an actor, but it created a process of identification—a symbolic integration of these women whose voices had not been heard by other farm-union actors—that was an important first step. What happened to this group, until very
recently considered powerless, when it took control of decisions affecting its members’ lives and work?

In the first place, there was collective action, the ability to mobilize and make demands, but there were also processes that involved members as rural women acquiring consciousness, knowledge, and skills. Tarrow (1997), examining the circumstances that give rise to a movement’s political power, focuses on the political opportunities that organize new movements and give form to their grievances. Questions of political traditions, elite tolerance, and the opening and closing of political possibilities are of fundamental importance. The reestablishment of democracy in 1983 and the creation of public policies favoring the strengthening of the institutional life of women in general were positive conditions for the MML’s emergence and empowerment. Other aspects of the process of empowerment were the actions of the MML itself as a social actor and the skills that they reinforced.

Pettersen and Solbakken (1998: 321), citing McWhirter, define “empowerment” as a process in which persons, organizations, or groups “become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context; develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives; exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others; support the empowerment of others in the community.” Accordingly, power and empowerment are strongly related to knowledge, in its broadest sense, including not only practical and technical knowledge but also self-knowledge and knowledge that allows one to choose and make decisions which, according to Giddens (1991), support life options (the politics of life).

**THE SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND**

The agricultural sector occupies an important place in Argentina’s political, social, and economic history. Traditionally, a distinction is made between the pampas, the fertile plain made up of the provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Cordoba, Entre Ríos and La Pampa, and the rest of the country (Cuyo, the Northwest, the Northeast, Patagonia, etc.). The pampas provides the bulk of agricultural production (70 percent) and almost all of the country’s grain, edible oils, and beef exports. The regional economies produce industrial crops such as sugarcane, tobacco, yerba maté, cotton, wool, wine, fruits, and some grains and engage in minor livestock production. The two are differentiated not only by the type of production they engage in but also by the type of land use, which in the pampas (except for fruit, vegetable, and some dairy production) is much more extensive.
In recent decades the agricultural sector has decreased in relative importance both in its overall contribution to the gross national product (GNP) and as a source of employment. Today it contributes only 7 percent of the GNP and employs only 10 percent of the national labor force. In spite of this, about 60 percent of exports continue to be agricultural. The last national agricultural census, taken in 1988, registered 378,000 farms occupying an area of 177,000,000 hectares. In the previous census, in 1969, there had been 538,000 farms, and it was estimated that in 2000 there would be 25 percent fewer farms than in 1988. Women supervise 11 percent of these farms. Women engaged in agricultural work make up 17.34 percent of the economically active rural population, and women are almost a third of the category “family workers related to the farmer” (Biaggi, 1998).

In recent decades a large number of small and medium-sized farms have disappeared, while large farms have maintained their importance. Between the 1969 and the 1988 census the number of farms of 200 hectares or less declined from 428,000 to 282,000. In the 1988 census, although farms of more than 1,000 hectares represented only 7.2 percent of all farms, they held more than 75 percent of the nation’s cultivable land, while farms of less than 200 hectares occupied barely 7.7 percent of the cultivable land. This class of farmers, the chacareros, does not have the same importance as it does in other “lands of recent settlement” (Australia, Canada) or in highly industrialized ones, but it is relatively more important in Argentina than in other Latin American or Third World countries (Archetti and Stölen, 1975). In comparison with other Latin American countries, the peasant sector is much smaller and primarily located in some of the regional economies—in sugarcane production in Tucumán, cotton production in the Chaco, Santiago de Estero.

The present agricultural crisis is the result of both the economic policies of the Menem administration (1989-1999) and the state’s lack of interest in or capacity for finding a solution. On a macro level, the convertibility plan of 1991 and the so-called structural reforms—privatization, deregulation (especially regarding labor), and the opening of markets to foreign trade and investment—constituted the central axis of the governmental plan promoted by Finance Minister Domingo Cavallo. The convertibility plan fixed by law the exchange rate of one Argentine peso to one U.S. dollar and decreed its full convertibility. It not only caused an immediate lowering of expectations and an inflationary spiral but also excluded the possibility of devaluation as an element of economic policy and established strong limitations on national monetary policy. The achievement of price stability permitted the implementation of an extremist structural adjustment program, applied, according to Menem, “without anesthesia or a parachute” (see Teubal, 2000-2001). The convertibility plan and the structural adjustment measures significantly
affected the agricultural sector in ways that were mostly prejudicial to small and medium-sized producers.

The November 1991 economic deregulation decree (no. 2284) put in place a number of measures concerning the internal economy, foreign trade, and the deregulation of markets, among them many that would affect the agricultural sector and especially the regional economies. Citing the necessity to reduce public expenditures, the government dissolved a large number of agencies, many of them created in the 1930s, that had traditionally defended the interests of agricultural producers: the National Meat Board, the National Grain Board, the National Sugar Board, the Yerba Maté Board, and others. The suspension or reduction of regulatory mechanisms such as production quotas, withholding tax on exports, and price supports followed. Budget allocations were reduced for a series of public institutions, in particular the National Institute of Agricultural Technology. These measures transformed the Argentine agricultural sector into one of the world’s most deregulated and open, thus exposing it to an unusual degree to the boom-and-bust cycles of the world economy. After the dismantling of its control agencies and the standards that had allowed it to regulate production and revenues, the state’s functions were reduced to extension and assistance programs and a few animal health and commercial consultation programs.

Thus, the state opened to market forces many of the decisions in which it had formerly intervened, creating much uncertainty. The measures adopted significantly affected prices and costs in the agricultural sector, subjecting it to violent changes in profitability. While the various strata of producers in each region and branch of production were affected differentially, in general the small and medium-sized producers suffered the most. The liquidation of the National Grain Board eliminated price supports and alternative channels for the marketing of cereals, leaving producers at the mercy of the large cereal merchants and exporters.

During the first few years of the convertibility plan, the international price of wheat remained very low. According to some estimates, agricultural prices in 1993 had fallen to half the 1980-1993 average value (Asociación Agroganadera de La Pampa, 1996: 17). In 1994 the price of wheat had risen to US$136 a ton, and only in 1996 did it exceed US$230 (rising to US$290), although during the harvest season and at the point of sale it fell to US$120 a ton. Producers were not always the immediate beneficiaries of the price increases that took place in the middle of the decade. At the end of the 1990s the decline of prices intensified, and this and the growing overvaluation of the peso affected profitability in this sector.

At the same time, the cost of production increased, especially for small and medium-sized producers, largely as a result of the increase in the rates for
public services (privatized during the decade) and in the costs of inputs. Both factors negatively affected the profitability of agricultural production and the rural family’s quality of life. Maintaining one’s standard of living required more and more land, and the owners of smaller farms experienced an ever-increasing struggle for survival.

Added to this was a fiscal policy that was particularly harsh toward producers with limited resources. Although duties on exports and special contributions for the maintenance of public agencies were eliminated, the increase in other duties, applied retroactively, particularly affected this group of producers. The value-added tax, introduced in 1990, increased steadily to its current 21 percent. Combined with a system of withholding taxes on bills of payment, it had a negative effect on producers’ financial circumstances. Eliminating the minimum tax exemptions on the profits tax also seriously affected small producers. Obligatory contributions to the social security regime that had been bankrupted by government actions also became an additional burden for rural producers. An increase in municipal taxes completed the regressive model applied to this sector.

Relatively low prices, increasing internal costs, and the growing pressure of taxation significantly limited the profitability of the agricultural sector. The worsened financial situation of producers, especially small and medium-sized ones, after the mid-1990s completed the picture. The relative stability in the general price level achieved by the convertibility plan favored the granting of bank credit to the agricultural sector. During the 1990s an increase in credit directed toward the agricultural sector reflected the situation with regard to credit for all productive sectors. The stability achieved by the convertibility plan freed a series of funds that had previously been deposited in the banking and financial systems to guard against inflation. This policy contributed to a consumer boom during the first years of the decade.

As agricultural credit increased, the total debt of the sector significantly increased. The siren song of modernization bewitched many producers into debt to purchase a tractor or replace agricultural machinery. The sector’s debt was 1.9 billion pesos (equivalent to the same amount in dollars) in 1990 and 7.1 billion pesos in 1994. According to estimates by CONINAGRO, the national federation of agricultural cooperatives, in April 1996, even taking into account debt payments in the period 1991/1992-1994/1995, the accumulated debt was 5.3 billion pesos (dollars) in 1995. In 1996 the total debt for the agricultural sector, including the emergency and commercial tax component, amounted to 10 billion pesos. Although the average payment period increased from one to a half to three years, the real rates and financial costs for the post-hyperinflationary period (post–1989-1991) exceeded 20 percent annually on the average in real terms (24 percent for 1991 and 20 percent for the
In addition, there were the costs included in bank credit, such as commissions and service charges, the onerous collateral requirements for securing credit, and the multiplying punitive interest that led to repossession.

The price stability achieved in the 1990s was not accompanied by a corresponding decline in nominal rates of interest; instead, real rates increased. As a result, financing became more profitable for the banks, but this situation was disastrous for those receiving credit. Likewise, in comparison with those for large producers, the rates of interest for medium-sized and small producers were extremely inequitable. The profitability of this sector, particularly for medium-sized and small producers, did not grow on a par with the debt. Increasingly, small and medium-sized producers found themselves in a precarious situation due to the overall macroeconomic conditions and falling agricultural prices.

At the same time, legal guidelines regarding credit were routinely ignored. For example, overdrawn accounts became one of the most important mechanisms for dispensing credit. It was reported that often “the overdrawn individual is obligated to investigate the financial transactions on his account since he does not know what they are crediting or debiting.” In effect, the banks unilaterally determined the interest rates on such accounts, which might range from reasonable to usurious. Similarly, the application of charges for services, “many of which are not even asked for by the account holder, who does not even have prior knowledge of them,” was impossible to determine. Many financial institutions had “a credit policy that consists of enticing their clients to operate with overdrawn accounts, often restricting access to other forms of credit. Thus, the client is obliged to go into debt by utilizing the most costly form of credit” (Asociación Agro-Ganadera de La Pampa, 1996: 11).

The prospects were not good. In fact, CONINAGRO estimated that in 1998-1999 the economic surplus of the agricultural sector, that is, the amount available to this sector for consumption, investment, and debt payments, did not exceed 5.5 billion pesos (dollars). After deducting consumption costs (4.5 billion), estimated investments (950 million), and debt payments (3 billion), a deficit of 2.95 billion remained and was expected to require major financing by the banking system or, better, some type of refinancing (CONINAGRO, January 11, 1999).

It is estimated that only 30 percent of the total debt of producers from La Pampa (the province where the MML began) is principal, the rest being interest, administrative costs, penalties, and so forth. To this debt must be added the mortgages held by national and provincial banks. The provincial bank refinanced many debts and reduced the annual interest rate from 18-19
percent to 9.9.5 percent, with a two-year grace period. It is estimated that of the 25,710,000 hectares planted in 1997-1998 some 12,000,000 were mortgaged, the majority with the National Bank.1

THE BANKS AND THE MML

The MML leaders recognize that the new circumstances affect both those who are indebted and those who are not. One of them summarized their demands as follows:

An immediate suspension of the auctions currently being carried out, recalculating the debt on the grounds of usury, and refinancing in order to pay. . . . [The recalculation] would be capital . . . we have adopted the slogan of the Mexican Barzón movement: “We do not deny the debt, we will pay what’s fair.” We want a traditional debt with an international interest rate, a Libor rate, and, finally, we make a further demand by saying “interest corresponding to profitability” because [the international interest rate], the Libor, also drains away the possibility of making payments. Associated with these demands, we also want price supports, because if we do not have them . . . we can’t pay. These four measures go together. We need recalculation, refinancing, an immediate end to the auctions so that we can continue to have land and tools so that we can work to pay, and price supports because without them [we still cannot pay].

A snowball effect hampered producers’ ability to pay their debts. MML President Lucy de Cornelis’s situation is similar to that of many others: a principal of 20,000 pesos in 1993 became 80,000 pesos during its first refinancing and finally reached 170,000 pesos in 1999. The generalization of the debt problem is reflected by the way that the banks approached the problem. As one banking officer put it, “The Bank of La Pampa not only continued to lend credit but also kept the rates intact, except for some minor changes, during the ‘tequila crisis’ and the present crisis in Brazil. What happened during those critical moments? The banks sat on their funds, not lending even a peso to anyone in certain specific areas.”

The MML achieved an important goal in 1999: the National Bank and other official banks not only suspended the auctions of agricultural producers’ goods but also agreed to refinance their debts. With the emergence of the MML, all of the agricultural organizations took up the issue of the auctions and the debt. The Federación Agraria Argentina (Argentine Agricultural Federation) sent a letter to the National Bank saying that farmers indebted to the bank “had had their land expropriated or their goods attached, losing their livelihood and finding it impossible to pay their debts,” and that the debt for
shipping charged by the agricultural industries was “asphyxiating the rural population.” Even CONINAGRO declared the debt “the most serious of the decade” (*La Nación*, December 14, 1999).

The MML’s Lucy de Cornelis responded that the refinancing with its installment plan was a step forward but had major limitations. Clarifying that from the beginning the women had demanded a 20-year bond, she emphasized that interest rates were too high, the tax on the interest was not viable, and the debt had to be recalculated in every case: “We demand the recalculation of all the debts since their origin and that the punitive ones be removed, something which has already been done. . . . This is the only way that we producers, especially small and medium-sized ones, can pay our debts.” She pointed out that if her original 1993 debt of some 20,000 pesos were recalculated she would owe no more than 30,000 pesos. She emphasized that the high interest rates—13-14 percent, including costs—had to be reduced to a maximum of 5 percent if producers were to escape their present situation. And despite this important decision regarding refinancing, the auctions continued.

As new problems emerged and as they interacted with other organizations, the MML organizers tackled other issues besides the demand for refinancing. The two most important of these had to do with gender and the environment. In effect, their actions in the public sphere, engaging in difficult negotiations with male union leaders, allowed them to reflect on their role as women in that sphere. They also began to discuss the environmental issue, which some had already considered when they questioned the technological model offered by neoliberalism.

**ORGANIZATION**

Led by Lucy de Cornelis, the women of La Pampa Province were the first to organize. Another pioneer, Joaquina Moreno, although not indebted, decided to participate because she believed that conditions for small and medium-sized farmers were worsening daily and existing organizations were finding it difficult to recognize and confront the problem. Subsequently, other women from Santa Fe Province, the southern provinces, and finally the poorest northern provinces met with the organizers. Cornelis recalls those first moments as follows:

In the first meeting I was in front of a round table that we had put in the room . . . the embarrassment . . . made me blush. . . . “Well, now,” the other women said, “we are going to create a provisional committee,” and they elected
me president. On September 21, 1995, when the other provincial women arrived, we told them, “Now, let’s talk.” There were women who were more capable [than I], but in that meeting they elected me the national president of the movement.

She considers “ability” (by which she means mainly having some formal education) to have been a fundamental element in her election. The reason she was chosen, however, is that members considered her someone who could secure, recognize, and mobilize resources and initiate direct action: “We were all desperate, but no one took the initiative to unite the people. . . . This is why we value Lucy so much and did not want to abandon her. She started the movement and continues to maintain the same energy as she did at that time.” Other MML members said, “She got us to do things together,” “She fights for our land,” “She stands up to the banks,” “We must fight all together.” Cornelis’s capacity for direct action does not derive from any previous experience in union organizations or from formal education (she never completed high school). Instead, it seems to come from passionate response to the unjust and insulting circumstances that she experienced. Although the initial moment of locating resources and calling together other farmers was important, it was her ability to maintain the momentum that made her a leader.

David Slater (1991), writing on the new social movements in Latin America, points to the importance of a leadership that can guarantee a rudimentary organizational form—a leadership that is in a position to articulate a project, a vision, a series of concepts and values, within a discourse that can effectively address the circumstances of the social subjects immersed in the situation. Cornelis’s project not only conferred relevance on her actions but also thrust her into a leadership position. Her leadership role was also based on her ability to relate to others, her skill in calling others together and acquiring their authorization to act in their name. Her rejection of the institutional discourse politicized her actions by transforming them into collective action, an implied struggle between two social actors confronting each other not only over the appropriation and reorientation of social values but also over symbolic and material resources (Melucci, 1984). Her actions not only revealed a widespread economic situation shared by other farmers but also presented an opportunity for innovating, creating, imagining, and transforming that situation. There was a space where objectives were constructed by all of the pioneers (those who called the meeting and those who attended it). Melucci (1992) reminds us that this process is active and relational, creating a “collective identity” that involves a system of understandings, intense interaction,
subjective and intersubjective investment, and emotional and affective exchange.

Our interviews with ten of the principal MML organizers permit some preliminary conclusions with regard to the movement. The women range in age from 40 to 65 and are descendants of European families, French, Italian, and Spanish. Although most have three or four children, two have none. Only two had any prior political experience, one while a student fighting for human rights and the other in an agricultural union. Some had participated in cooperatives. These characteristics allow us to place them in the social world of the small cities or towns of the country’s interior that are the administrative centers for the surrounding countryside. During the twentieth century the inhabitants of these towns, descendants of immigrants, achieved, with great difficulty, some degree of social mobility by trusting in hard work, family effort, and education. Cornelis and other organizers have sons or daughters attending high school or the university. Many of them spoke of difficult family circumstances in the past—struggles over or loss of an inheritance, bankruptcy, loss of land. The danger of losing what they have fought so hard for appears repeatedly in their accounts, and consciously or unconsciously this seems to have been one of the main motivations for their collective action.

Having a farm not only allows them to participate in the market economy, giving them sufficient income to permit their children go to school, but also constitutes a legacy for future generations. Again, as in much of their family history, all this was in danger of being lost. Land and other property are part of the conjugal relation. Nevertheless, if the land is the husband’s inheritance, the wife and children are heirs to it but not proprietors. A 1959 law affecting profit-generating property establishes that if the husband dies, the wife can benefit from joint ownership of the land for ten years. There is, however, a tradition of some juridical equality with regard to family inheritance. Problems emerge in those areas of the rural economy (in northern Argentina) where two factors militate against a woman’s right to property: the lack of land titles proving ownership to farms and the fact that common-law marriages are not recognized in inheritance cases. In the regions where the MML is strongest, we did not detect stark imbalances by gender within the family group. The danger for these women of losing their inheritance generally came from the state, the banks, and their creditors.

In conclusion, the subjects’ social background—their families’ progress, their own development as rural women, their cultural traditions as daughters and granddaughters of immigrants, and the image they carry of their immigrant grandparents—is important for an understanding of the sources of their
strength. Personal experiences of success and loss help to explain their surprising decision in the 1990s to throw off their aprons and enter the public sphere.

From its inception, the MML has utilized the mass media to spread its message. At first, local radio and newspapers provided it a forum and contributed to its growth. In the weeks following the actions against the auction of the Cornelis property, the provincial newspapers asked, “Will the example of Winfreda [the town in which Cornelis lived] spread?” They also announced that women from the western part of the province of La Pampa had met independently and made contact with Cornelis. After the June 3, 1995, auction in Winfreda, representatives from the different zones of La Pampa and the provinces of Santa Fe, Buenos Aires, Río Negro, and Formosa met on September 21 and set up a national committee.

During the second stage, the pioneers sent representatives from auction to auction, having contacted the media in advance. Often, they said, the mere idea that they would be intervening contributed to public officials’ halting the auctions themselves, and on other occasions they created circumstances that prevented an auction from proceeding. Even when they did not succeed and the lands were sold, their presence and solidarity were supportive for those who lost their land.

One of the organizers told us how a group that subsequently joined the MML was created in the province of Tucumán:

It was beautiful. First, we knew about the auction, so we went to organize the resistance. We organized the movement, and two weeks later the auction took place. In actuality, the auction became not only a public act but also a political one. A large number of organizations were there—the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, HIJOS [an organization of the children of the disappeared]. It was the first time that anything like this had ever happened in Tucumán. When the auctioneer began, we all stood up and started singing the national anthem. This was a completely new situation. The auction took place nevertheless, but we annulled it. Ten days later they held another one, which we also annulled.

The MML has a number of legal consultants who support its actions. Actions take place on two levels: protesting to stop auctioneers in the act and appropriate legal action. The legal consultants and organizers estimate that more than 500 auctions have been halted in the past five years. If direct action by the MML is impossible (Cornelis was jailed and the other organizers were prosecuted), the lawyers file an appeal to declare the act null and void by reason of “legal error.” They have won the majority of these cases, but the bank continually tries to organize new auctions.
Small groups of women identifying with the MML continue to emerge in many provinces and regions of the country, and some of them attend the meetings of the national committee. At the national level, the organization is extremely precarious and spontaneous, lacking financial resources for trips, telephone bills, a regular meeting place, or a newsletter. Nevertheless, it empowers itself not only through its every action but also with the emergence of every new group of indebted women.

**EXPANSION: THE CREATION OF NETWORKS**

One of the first initiatives of the pioneers was to join with other national or international organizations that had experience with these types of actions. Since their husbands or fathers were members of small or medium-sized farmers’ unions, they had contacts with these organizations. They had the most contact with Chacareros Federados (Federated Farmers), located in the grain-producing region, and the Federación Agraria (Agrarian Federation) of which it was a part. Chacareros Federados takes a much more combative line than the official position. The organizers have been able to identify and criticize asymmetrical gender relations and to establish contact with men who are open to the new democratic currents. They have pursued empowerment for their movement through links with other organizations that share their fighting spirit and show respect for their gender.

The MML has associated itself with provincial organizations composed of indebted small farmers and merchants such as the Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero (The Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero—MOCASE) and the Centro de Empresarios de Famallá (Tucumán) (The Entrepreneurial Center of Famallá). Furthermore, they have consolidated their relationship with various women’s organizations by holding an annual meeting on March 8, International Women’s Day. They are also in contact with human rights organizations and with the Confederación de Trabajadores Argentinos (Confederation of Argentine Workers—CTA) and the Movimiento de Trabajadores Argentinos (Movement of Argentine Workers—MTA), combative trade-union organizations that provide an alternative to the “official” Confederación General del Trabajo (General Confederation of Labor—CGT). Although they have a strong relationship with some legislators from the center-left political parties that are part of the Alianza (Alliance), they declare themselves politically neutral. They also have links with university groups, progressive church sectors (many of the organizers are very religious), and Indian communities. Their national meetings attract the media, both local and national.
Their relationships on the national level are oriented toward establishing networks: organizing collective projects, participating in joint actions, seeking to introduce new directions that would include them. These networks become important strategic resources for their actions by creating sympathy and solidarity in different social worlds (i.e., women’s, religious, university, etc., organizations). In Latin America they have contacts with the Barzón, the Mexican debtors’ organization, and the Brazilian Movimento Sem Terra (Landless Workers’ Movement—MST). Lucy de Cornelis speaks of establishing a “Latin American debtors’ movement.”

What unifies the MST and the MML is the land issue: the Brazilians want to acquire it, while the Argentines want to keep from losing it. “They’re fighters just like us,” said one of the MML organizers. However, the MST also represents the “feared other,” the landless peasant. Cornelis attended the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre and came into contact with the international organization Via Campesina. Meetings like this represent a very important advance, since they are oriented toward placing the struggle in a broader global context.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

The MML emerged in the mid-1990s, when the political and economic circumstances of Argentina presaged the cycle of protests that was to emerge some years later. The debt burden of small and medium-sized farmers resulted from concrete policies such as convertibility and the increase or decrease in interest rates. At the end of the decade there was a great deal of instability in world financial markets and fluctuation in agricultural prices, and the state chose not to implement effective policies for small and medium-sized producers.

Although the MML emerged during the debt crisis of the agricultural sector, it eventually became a strong voice against the entire neoliberal model. This was possible because it broke with the commonsense notion that debts are the responsibility of the individual who incurred them. This break allowed them to analyze and deconstruct their own debts, to raise the question of their irrationality, and to initiate a new discourse that called into question the legitimacy of the debt and of the economic model in general.2

The MML is a clear representative of the new agrarian social protest because in addition to its economic demands it makes others that respond to the problems of contemporary society. In fact, the protests of the 1990s can be characterized as novel in that they involve new social actors and call attention to a new type of social question. In this case, the type of social actor—an
organization of women farmers and peasants—conditions the demands expressed.

Pettersen and Solbakken’s (1998) conceptualization of farm women’s strategies for change can be applied to the MML case. These writers maintain that “empowerment” implies a movement from self-understanding to collective action that has three dimensions: the personal, that of intimate relationships, and the collective. Our objective was to see the organization as a developing social actor with the capacity to participate in the agricultural transformations under way. The fact that it is a women’s organization gives it the ability to affect the new agrarian protest on various levels. To this end it has had major confrontations with the leaders of traditional agrarian unions because the men do not want to relinquish their decision-making positions. The MML calls for more participation by women in all public and decision-making spaces, but in spite of this it cannot be considered a feminist movement.

NOTES

1. In 1998-1999 the debt crisis extended to all sectors of the economy. In 1999 “bank loans in an abnormal situation [being behind in payments] grew by 30 percent in the nation’s ten most important banks” (Clarín, July 10, 1999).

2. The issue of responsibility for the debt is frequently discussed in a country where the state, during the last dictatorship, assumed the burden of much of the private international debt and where the state assists and subsidizes the large banks and the automobile industry and declares itself powerless when confronted with huge fiscal irregularities.

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Gender, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity

by

Lynn Stephen

Many antiessentialist critiques have been made of ethnic, gender, racial, and national conceptions of identity. In fact, some of the most dynamic areas of feminist theorizing have interrogated concepts such as “women,” “men,” “the feminine,” “masculine subjectivity,” and “sex” as falsely unifying heterogeneous groups of people (Butler, 1990, 1993; Fausto Sterling, 1997; Garber, 1993). What, then, is the need for a further debate about “identity”? The concept of identity, however flawed, is, nevertheless, obviously still useful to those engaged in grassroots social movements. Rather than abandon the concept of identity, Stuart Hall proposes that we continue to think with it in a detotalized and deconstructed form. He also proposes that we focus on the process of identification, which he sees as a construction, a process never completed. In the end, identification is “conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured, it does not obliterate difference. . . . Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. . . . And since as a process it operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of ‘frontier-effects’” (Hall, 1996a: 2-3).

While it is clear to women in grassroots movements that participation is a constant process of negotiating difference, the need to create unitary names, symbols, and goals can result in the essentialization of women as “mothers,” as in the case of El Salvador’s CO-MADRES, or as “Indians,” as in the case of indigenous women participating in and supporting the struggle of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation—EZLN) and, more broadly, Mexico’s national movement for indigenous autonomy. Organizing requires the projection of “sameness” to outsiders. Strategically, demands must stem from a coherent social location understandable to those who are the audience for them—often institutions of

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the state. The political necessity of projecting “sameness” does not, however, explain how a movement operates, what it means to those involved, or what it is able to accomplish. It is also not evidence of shared consciousness or identity. My objective, then, is to compare the process internal to a social movements with its presentation of “self” to outsiders. We need to examine the tension between political identity formation as the constant and contingent negotiation of difference within organizations and the need to project unitary identities that usually result in essentialization.

Here, I will focus specifically on the process of identification in two discursive fields bound to grassroots movements. First, with regard to the Comité de Madres y Familiares de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados de El Salvador “Monsenor Romero” (Monsignor Romero Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador—CO-MADRES), I will explore the construction of “motherhood” by those within the movement and contrast it with the way they have been read by outsiders. Second, I will explore the construction of the concept of “indigenous autonomy” within the national movement for indigenous rights in Mexico and its simultaneous endorsement and challenge by indigenous women and their advisers. After discussing these cases, I will draw some comparative conclusions suggesting ways to deal with the contradictory aspects of identity found in women’s grassroots organizing. Earlier analyses of women’s participation in grassroots movements have relied on dichotomous paradigms such as “feminine” versus “feminist” or a continuum of “practical” versus “strategic” demands (see Molyneux, 1985). Focusing on the contradictory aspects of identity and the process of identification, I believe we can better get at the complexities and contradictions which emerge in the process of women’s collective action rather than resorting to binary categories of explanation. Theoretical analyses of earlier movements as “feminine” or “feminist” have given way to recognition that, beginning in the 1980s, many women’s movements in Latin America combined a commitment to basic survival for women and their children with a challenge to the subordination of women to men.

THE CO-MADRES OF EL SALVADOR: WHAT DOES MOTHERHOOD MEAN?

Founded in 1977, CO-MADRES was one of the first groups in El Salvador to denounce the atrocities of the government and the military. It was formally established as a committee on Christmas Eve 1977 under the auspices of Monsignor Oscar Romero (Schirmer, 1993: 32). By the mid-1980s, the
initial group, numbering approximately nine, had grown to several hundred. The membership was from the beginning quite heterogeneous in terms of class and occupation, including teachers, workers, peasants, students, lawyers, market women, housewives, and small shopkeepers.

The work of the CO-MADRES initially consisted of trying to locate the bodies of the victims of the repression by the Salvadoran security forces directed against activists in labor unions, Christian base communities, independent peasant organizations, student groups, human rights organizations, and the outlawed political parties that made up the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front—FMLN). The CO-MADRES also defended the rights of political prisoners and the families of victims of human rights abuses. Their tactics ranged from public demonstrations to taking over buildings such as cathedrals and the headquarters of the Salvadoran Red Cross. They also made daily visits to body dumps, clandestine cemeteries, and morgues to search for new victims of repression. Once found, they attempted to identify them and locate their families. The fate of such victims was also publicized to call attention to the ongoing violation of human rights in El Salvador.

Beginning in 1979, they began to take their message overseas, traveling in Latin America, Europe, and Australia, Canada, and the United States. They were the first recipients of the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in 1984. Their trademark tool for political organizing was testimony. Women told their personal stories of losing loved ones and of what happened to them in their search. These stories included Salvadoran history and a message about the need for change in the economic and political conditions in the country (see Stephen, 1994; 1997a). The CO-MADRES participated in a wide range of national and international forums on human rights and in the Federación Latinoamericana de Familiares de Detenidos y Desaparecidos (Federation of the Relatives of the Disappeared and Detained in Latin America—FEDEFAM), which includes organizations from 17 Latin American countries. In such forums and in the press coverage of them, the CO-MADRES projected an image of mothers but also became more and more identified as human rights activists who operated in an ever-widening theater, local, national, and international.

The CO-MADRES themselves became the victims of government repression. Their first office was bombed in 1980, and since then their offices have been bombed at least four more times. The majority of the most active CO-MADRES have been detained, tortured, and raped. Between 1977 and 1993, 48 members were detained, 5 assassinated for their activism, and 3 disappeared (Stephen, 1994; Schirmer, 1993). Even after the Salvadoran peace accords were signed in December 1991, harassment and disappearances...
continued. In February 1993, the son and nephew of one of the founders of CO-MADRES were assassinated in Usulután. This woman had already lived through her own detention, the detention and gang rape of her daughter, and the disappearance and assassination of other family members. For many, the human rights abuses committed against them fortified their determination and resulted in a difficult confrontation with their own treatment as women at the hands of national security forces.

While the formal agenda of the CO-MADRES remained focused on confronting the sources of human rights abuses in El Salvador, in their private conversations some members began a serious questioning of female gender roles. Many women activists received no support from their husbands or were beaten. When detained CO-MADRES were raped as part of their torture, they faced rejection by their husbands and families as damaged goods. Internal discussions about what kinds of rights they had as women, as workers, and as mothers slowly became part of their public agenda at the end of the 1980s. Support for a questioning of oppressive gender roles for women came in part from El Salvador’s small feminist movement (see Stephen, 1997a: 56-107; Ready, 1999). As women’s sections of other popular organizations began to question their subordinate positions in their own organizations and homes, other Salvadoran women were beginning to take a public stand on issues often identified with feminism—rape, unequal work burdens in the home, the political marginalization of women, and women’s lack of control over their own sexuality and bodies.

After the signing of the peace accords in late 1991, the political situation changed significantly in El Salvador. Human rights abuses continued but at a slower pace. Much energy was devoted to the United Nations Truth Commission’s investigation of human rights abuses. The CO-MADRES worked with the Commission and also became involved in broader Salvadoran politics as the FMLN became a legal political party and a wide range of women’s groups came together to develop a women’s political platform. By the mid-1990s, all of the women’s groups that had been associated with the five political parties of the FMLN were autonomous—some more than others.

Internationally, solidarity organizations began to lose members in the 1990s, and by 1995, many international committees supportive of the CO-MADRES and other grassroots organizations had disappeared or been severely reduced. The CO-MADRES continue their work in El Salvador with fewer activists, many having gone into other kinds of political work. Nevertheless, they maintain their office and presence and continue to press for human rights and to develop internally, focusing on human rights, domestic violence, women’s health, and the economic problems of marginalized women.
A majority of women in CO-MADRES are mothers. While these women share the experience of giving birth and/or adoption and a general notion of what it means to be a Salvadoran mother, this does not mean that they joined CO-MADRES with uniform views. The diversity of class and occupational sectors represented and women’s varied political experiences ensured a variety of perspectives on motherhood. A significant number of women in CO-MADRES had suffered repression in their families for their participation in Christian base communities, and leaders such as Alicia Panameño de García were already questioning their roles as wives and mothers responsible for all housework, child care, and general reproductive maintenance. Others, however, were not. Sofía Aves Escamillas, for example, identified herself as a mother who had a legitimate right to know the whereabouts of her children. She was from a peasant background, and her sons were disappeared for their participation in an independent peasant cooperative. As she stayed with CO-MADRES over a 15-year period, she began to explore other issues such as female sexuality and the overall oppression of women, but her thinking on these issues remained distinct from that of other women such as Alicia Panameño. Sofía was never comfortable discussing issues of sexuality, and, while she listened, she did not actively participate in or approve of this type of discussion. Sofía and Alicia thus came to the CO-MADRES with different ideas about what motherhood meant, how it defined them as persons, and what kinds of political actions would stem from it. Each was also profoundly changed by her experience in the CO-MADRES.

“Being a mother” and “motherhood” were constantly changing concepts which were expansive in the sense that they came to represent a wide range of issues within the organization—bearing and rearing children; defending them and oneself against state repression; having the right to free speech and being heard as a full citizen; having control over one’s body and its physical integrity within marriage, within families, in prison, and in any state institution; and recognizing and controlling one’s sexuality. This range of meanings of motherhood was not equally experienced or shared by all women in the CO-MADRES but was the discursive field within which motherhood came to be represented and contested.

People outside of the CO-MADRES and other “mothers’” movements have sometimes reduced the meaning of “mother” to a very narrow one. In the 1980s, these movements were generally seen as using “traditional” expectations of what mothers do to conduct political demonstrations in times and places that no one else could. Capitalizing on Marianismo, the cult of the Virgin Mary, women such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were portrayed as making an appeal based on “the most conservative aspects of feminine identity” (Feijoó, 1989: 88). The response of mothers to the kidnapping
of their children was described as being based on the simple fact of their motherhood. While many mothers were no doubt strongly affected by the loss of their children and extremely militant in their efforts to find them, we cannot conclude that their motherhood somehow imbued them with a uniform identity or interpretation of what they were doing. As Diana Taylor (1997: 194) argues in her analysis of the performance of motherhood by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina,

The mother’s movement did not begin when the individual mothers became acquainted in their search for their children; it originated when the women consciously decided to protest and agitate as mothers. That as marks the conceptual distance between the essentialist notion of motherhood attributed to the Madres and the self-conscious manipulation of the maternal role—understood as performative—that makes the movement the powerful and intensely dramatic spectacle that it is.

Hegemonic gender constructions in Argentina, El Salvador, and elsewhere no doubt did allow women to tread on political terrain where others dared not to go under repressive times such as the Proceso in Argentina and the repression during the civil war in El Salvador. But such hegemonic constructions of motherhood also have contradictions within them, and the meaning of motherhood has always varied with age, class, ethnic, and racial affiliation. The process of identification in terms of motherhood involves contested terrain for both individuals and groups. Unity based on identity (gendered and otherwise) is not natural or inevitable but the result of the continual construction of artificial closure against the constant grain of difference (Hall, 1996a: 5).

In the case of the CO-MADRES, the contingent process of identification with motherhood was constantly negotiated both by individuals within their homes, where they struggled daily against static definitions of their “proper” roles, and collectively in their public actions as they pushed against larger cultural expectations of motherhood. What facilitated the CO-MADRES’ dramatic public actions and ongoing confrontations with the repressive state and military forces of El Salvador in the 1980s was, I believe, the fact that motherhood in Latin America has always been multidimensional and both public and private. As observed among the women of the CO-MADRES, for example, mothering can mean bringing your four children with you to a stall in a public marketplace, staying there all day, walking home with them after dark, and stopping to visit relatives on the way. It can also mean bringing your children to church, to cemeteries, and to jails as you confront government officials in search of your family. Alternative cultural discourses of motherhood are constantly being spun out of the different daily lives of women in
Latin America. The existence of these varied discourses on motherhood not only facilitated the “public” actions of the CO-MADRES but allowed them to develop and remain resilient in the face of severe repression and harassment in all arenas of their lives.

As Taylor (1997: 196-197) notes for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and I have noted elsewhere for the CO-MADRES (Stephen, 1997a: 35-37), group demonstrations of public motherhood engender a contradiction that allows those performing motherhood to be reclassified as whores or madwomen. The public performance of mothering in El Salvador worked best as an initial strategy for obtaining political space and connecting with international solidarity organizations such as the support chapters that were formed in the 1980s in the United States, Europe, and Australia. Deliberate essentializing can only be taken so far before the behavior of women like the CO-MADRES is seen as subversive. Subversives become subject to treatment on the part of security forces that is not considered appropriate for “good” human beings and proper mothers. Such reclassification demonstrates the permeability of identity boundaries.

ENGENDERING INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND CULTURE IN MEXICO

The two and a half years of negotiations between the EZLN and the Mexican government between 1994 and 1996 produced the first document on indigenous rights signed by the state that included the participation of indigenous peoples. The San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture were formally signed by the Mexican government and the EZLN in February 1996. After more than five years of intransigence and continued pressure by indigenous organizations and a national tour of 23 Zapatista comandantes, the Mexican Congress and Senate passed a watered-down version of the San Andrés Accords in April 2001 that differed substantially from the document signed in 1996. The 2001 Law of Indigenous Rights and Culture is much weaker in terms of indigenous self-determination, recognition of collective rights to land, territory, and natural resources, and the right of indigenous communities to regional affiliation, among other points. In April 2001, the Zapatistas denounced the new law, broke off contacts with the government, and pulled out of yet-to-begin, new peace talks. What follows is the story of how indigenous women attempted to influence these accords and in the process built a national network.

In the preparation of the accords and in National Indigenous Congresses held in Mexico City in 1996 and 1997, indigenous women helped to broaden
the notion of indigenous autonomy and made it clear what kind of political culture they understand it to include. In the process, they have expressed their sense of themselves as citizens in a variety of arenas—family, community, organization, and nation. The National Indigenous Congress, a coalition of hundreds of indigenous organizations and communities representing more than 20 ethnic groups, has loosely defined indigenous autonomy as respect for the internal practices and decision-making modes of indigenous communities and nations. It has also demanded that indigenous communities have the opportunity to participate in the various levels of economic, political, cultural, and legal decision making associated with the state (see Stephen, 1997b; Regino, 1996).

Women who have participated in the National Indigenous Congress and in the preparation of the 1996 Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture have attempted to influence several arenas of citizenship at once and to integrate concerns of ethnicity and gender with nationalism. The notion of autonomy articulated by indigenous women and their advisers through almost three years of meetings and workshops in Chiapas and elsewhere is expansive. They refer to economic autonomy, access to and control over means of production; political autonomy, basic political rights; physical autonomy, the right to make decisions concerning their own bodies and the right to a life without violence; and sociocultural autonomy, the right to assert their specific identities as indigenous women (Hernández Castillo, 1997: 112). The women’s resolutions from the 1996 National Indigenous Congress (Meneses, 1996) are as follows:

The women demand recognition of their right to equality in homes, community, and in all of the spaces of the nation…. They demand that their citizenship rights be recognized; their right to equal political participation with men, their right to property and land, and to participate in decision making in their communities. Because of these rights, they demand legislation which equalizes the position of indigenous women and guarantees their right against being violated physically, psychologically, sexually, or economically. In terms of the undeclared war… they demand an end to the rape of indigenous women: women cannot continue to be war booty. We demand an immediate and careful investigation of all of the acts of violence against indigenous women and exemplary punishment for those responsible.

In documents produced by women in the National Indigenous Congress, the physical and psychological integrity of women’s bodies and reproductive decision making are linked to the right to land, property, and participation in political decision making in all arenas. This integrated vision makes visible the systematic marginalization of indigenous women and suggests specific
ways to correct it. It has its origins in the Chiapas Women’s Convention held in preparation for the EZLN’s 1994 National Democratic Convention, which drew 8,000 participants from throughout Mexico to the Lacandón jungle (see Stephen, 1995). The Chiapas Women’s Convention asked that women make up 50 percent of the delegates to the proposed Constitutional Convention and envisioned a model of government that was democratic and participatory rather than patriarchal, vertical, discriminatory, or corporativist (Rojas, 1994: 190-195). While the summary document of the Chiapas Women’s Convention mentions the need for laws to guarantee women’s equal participation with men in a wide range of arenas, the most detailed proposals fall under the heading of “Family Life.” Some of the points highlighted include the following (Rojas, 1994: 194-195):

[We want] men to change, to respect us and to learn that we have rights and that they should help us so that everyone respects our rights.
[We want] to be respected for our choice of marriage partner, and we want those who sell women [into marriage] to be punished.
[We want] mothers and fathers to teach their sons and daughters how to do domestic work at a young age and that the work of women matters as much as that of men.
[We want] both parents to decide together how many children to have, and we want men to help women with the responsibility of family planning.
[We want] men who don’t respect women, who rape and mistreat women and don’t fulfill their responsibilities to be punished.
[We want] women’s rights to inherit property to be recognized and their rights to land respected whether or not they are widows.  

Here, the notion of participatory citizenship at the level of the home is clearly expressed. While the document is the outcome of the participation not only of indigenous women but also of mestiza advisers from a variety of organizations, it contains the seeds of ideas that are followed through in the discussions of the meaning of indigenous autonomy for women.

In two subsequent forums, in October 1995 and January 1996, to prepare the Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture, the most contentious issue for women was the meaning of usos y costumbres—roughly, the customs and traditions of indigenous culture. While one of the central points of proposals for autonomy was respect for indigenous systems of justice and political decision making, some of the “traditions” included under usos y costumbres did not promote gender equity—quite the opposite. For example, while the inclusion of men, women, and even children in community assemblies is the practice in some Zapatista base communities, this is uncommon in many parts of Chiapas and in other indigenous communities in Mexico. “Traditional” political decision making in many Zapotec communities in Oaxaca, for example,
involves community assemblies attended by men between the ages of 18 and 70. In such assemblies, the majority of men present generally do not speak but listen and simply vote silently with their hands if a resolution is put forward (see Stephen, 1991). (In ejidos with a significant number of women ejidatarios, this pattern may be changing somewhat [Stephen, 1994].) Thus, for many indigenous women, “traditional” community decision-making processes exclude them. Other such “traditions” may include the beating of women by men, the negotiation of marriages by parents without respecting their children’s wishes, and divisions of labor in which women work many more hours than men—patterns that I found to be common in a significant number of households in rural Oaxaca, Nayarit, and Chiapas.

In the forum of October 1995, indigenous women from the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Puebla, Querétaro, México, and Hidalgo and from Mexico City and their advisers put forward a key modification of the term usos y costumbres: “We demand that our customs and traditions be respected if and when they do not violate women’s rights” (Ce-Acatl, 1995: 22). This wording was more or less adopted in the 1996 accords. In October 1996, the EZLN and the Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación (National Commission of Concord and Pacification—COCOPA), composed of representatives from Mexico’s three leading political parties, announced that a joint commission had been formed to monitor the implementation of the accords. The COCOPA developed a legislative proposal endorsed by the EZLN, in which women’s rights were stated as follows: “[Indigenous peoples] have the right . . . to apply their own normative systems in the regulation and solution of internal conflict, respecting individual rights, human rights, and the dignity and integrity of women.” The proposal recognizes the right of indigenous peoples “to elect their authorities and exercise their own forms of internal government in accordance with their norms . . . guaranteeing the equal participation of women” (La Jornada, January 13, 1997). The words “customs” and “traditions” have been replaced in the COCOPA draft with “normative systems,” indicating the volatility of the notion of “customs and traditions” from a gendered point of view. The draft thus subtly addresses the political participation of women where “traditionally” they have often been absent and also discourages internal forms of conflict resolution that do not respect women’s rights.

Other issues highlighted in these preparatory meetings, including women’s right to land, unequal divisions of labor in households, domestic violence, and rape, were, however, absent in the 1996 accords and legislative proposal. The accords omitted all the demands concerning the democratization of the home and sexual violence and addressed women only at the level of the community, stating that they should participate in all legislative
processes and be involved in choosing local leaders. The Law on Indigenous Rights and Culture approved by the Mexican Senate and Congress in April 2001 similarly omitted most of the demands made by women in the preparatory meetings, focusing only on women’s right to political participation in their communities. Nevertheless, the demands of indigenous women have been inserted permanently into national politics in Mexico, and an ongoing dialogue between indigenous women from different regions of Mexico has been established.

For many women who participated in the process leading up to the signing of the 1996 accords, coming together with other people from throughout the nation—in this case, other indigenous women—has created networks that have lives of their own. Ultimately, these networks may prove to be more important than the accords themselves or the 2001 law. Women in the national movement for indigenous autonomy have begun to carve out a space and a political vision that links home, community, and nation to a new framework for being indigenous in Mexico—autonomous in economic, cultural, and political decision making but part of the Mexican nation. This vision and the political culture it represents have the potential to open up new political spaces not only for indigenous women but for other women in Mexico as well. In order to do this, indigenous women from different regions of the country, with distinct regional histories and ethnic relations and different languages, had to essentialize themselves as “women” within the National Indigenous Congress and in relation to the state. At the same time, however, they had to recognize and mediate their differences.

This involved bridging the difference between, for example, María Elena Pérez, a Yaqui indigenous leader who works with the Frente Independiente de Pueblos Indígenas (Independent Front of Indian Peoples—FIPI) from the state of Sonora and Lorenza González Xochil, a Tzotzil woman from Chiapas. The Yaqui consider themselves to be a nation within a nation and have a territory of 490,000 hectares divided into eight autonomous communities. Lorenza comes from a small community that is politically divided, with some members having allegiances to the PRI and others being aligned with the Zapatistas or with parties of political opposition. María Elena spends a lot of time in Mexico City in the larger circles of national indigenous coalitions, and Lorenza works on a local level with a women’s weaving cooperative. What indigenous autonomy means for each of these women and the circumstances under which they conduct their politics are vastly different.

Indigenous women’s unity against some of the men who wished to silence them no doubt helped to facilitate this process. The women’s internal dialogue around a wide range of issues speaks to their multiple identities as primarily rural, indigenous, and female. This process did not create a homogeneous
identity out of many but provided a discursive field within which women participated from different positions.

During 1998, Mexico hosted two continental meetings of indigenous women that included representatives from Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Canada, the United States, Panama, and El Salvador. In these meetings, indigenous women from Mexico shared their problems with many others and thus moved into an even more heterogeneous organizing context. This dual process of organizing, first as ethnically distinct indigenous women within a national indigenous movement and, second, as Mexican indigenous women in the context of a larger grouping of indigenous women from the Americas, both reinforces and works against women’s different senses of distinct ethnic identities and sense of Mexican nationalism. Such interlinked national and transnational organizing produces embedded layers of what Gayatri Spivak (1989, 1990, 1993) has called strategic essentialism—the need to project “sameness” to outsiders.

CONCLUSIONS: IDENTITY, STRATEGY, AND CITIZENSHIP

These two examples illustrate the contested nature of identification. What it means to be a mother in the CO-MADRES is differentially constituted for each woman on entering the group and continues to be contested as women join together in strategic actions. The discursive contexts of these actions—going to clandestine cemeteries with peasants, occupying the headquarters of the International Red Cross, a radio station, or a church, talking to a touring German feminist organization, discussing domestic violence and rape under torture—continually shapes and changes the meaning of “mothering” for women in the CO-MADRES. This contested sense of “mothering” has a counterpart in their projections of themselves as “mothers”—providing a unified label for who they are.

For women who are participating in the National Indigenous Congress and the movement for indigenous autonomy in Mexico, “autonomy” is a contested discursive field that frames the internal process of participation in a coalition by women from many different locations. In Mexico, the paradox of being indigenous in a country that has built its nationalism out of a “proud Indian past” but relegates its indigenous citizens to the bottom of the heap in the present has provided an ideological opening for women from different locations to question their marginality within indigenous organizations, communities, and families as well as in “the Mexican nation.” A diverse group of indigenous women has engaged in forums on autonomy and
questioned the unexamined notion of “tradition” in what have been largely male discussions of indigenous autonomy. They have questioned the invented tradition of “Indian communities” and the assumption of democracy within these communities.

By insisting that discussions on autonomy address the multiple arenas of home, community, and nation, indigenous women have simultaneously fractured the image of “Indian autonomy” projected by the National Indigenous Congress and deliberately essentialized themselves externally by projecting the demands of “indigenous women.” Internal debates have highlighted significant regional differences between women in terms of the particular models of community autonomy they embrace—depending on whether they live in multiethnic communities, communities that are monoethnic but subordinate to non-Indian communities, or monoethnic hamlets politically subordinated by another indigenous ethnic group. Despite the mediated regional, ethnic, and even class differences that come to light in discussions and planning, their demands for “indigenous women’s right to inherit property,” “to be respected for our choice of marriage partner,” and “to have fathers teach their sons that the work of women matters as much as that of men” result in the creation of a homogeneous identity as read externally. This does not, however, erase their internal differences.

Identities are constructed through difference—through the relation to what is not, to what is lacking, to what has been called “the other” or the “constitutive outside.” Identities “can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside,’ abjected” (Hall, 1996a: 5; see also Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993). The form of unity, of closure, that they exhibit is constructed and discursive. Another way of stating this is that identities involve discursive processes of essentialization and homogenization.

This is true also of politics and the exercise of citizenship by women in Latin America. Grassroots political organizing that interfaces regularly with the state in Mexico and El Salvador requires a homogeneous identity, a strategic essentialism, a constituency that is visible and capable of being counted. The 1996 accords signed by the EZLN and the Mexican government on indigenous rights and the 2001 Law on Indigenous Rights and Culture are framed in terms of “indigenous” peoples and deal marginally with “indigenous women.” Many nongovernmental and other organizations supporting the National Indigenous Congress and the Zapatista movement also have programs targeting “indigenous women.” Bargaining with the state and holding it accountable require the deployment of essentialist identities and categories.

In El Salvador, the CO-MADRES maintained a constant struggle to be recognized as any category other than “subversive” throughout their existence.
Their projection of “mothers” as an organizational identity was part of a strategy for achieving recognition and protection from repression. As we have seen, the strategy had much better results internationally than in El Salvador, where they were often victims of repression. Once the peace accords were signed in 1992, however, their identity as mothers and family members of the disappeared gave them a basis for political participation in the United Nations Truth Commission and in national politics.

The double-edged sword of identity is nowhere clearer than in women’s grassroots organizing. The fact that political recognition of women and other marginalized sectors of nations such as indigenous peoples requires political action on the basis of essentialized identity categories points to at least an initial strategy based on affirmative action rather than on abstract notions of universal citizenship. The difference between politics and cultural analysis is that while we can deconstruct essentialist categories and show the contingency, temporality, and incompleteness of identity formation, essentialist categories are alive and well in the political arenas of Latin America. While universal citizenship may be appealing in a poststructural world in which all hierarchies of power and oppression have been deconstructed, in the real world such hierarchies persist. Thus, women in organizations such as the COMADRES and the National Indigenous Congress are bound to exercise their citizenship rights—at least for now—through the imagined unity of identities that in everyday life are never experienced as a stable core of self, unchanging through time. That “essentialism has been deconstructed theoretically, does not mean it has been displaced politically” (Hall, 1996b: 249).

NOTES


2. While under Mexican law, women can have landholding rights while married and as single mothers, in many communities women receive land rights only when they are widowed.

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Book Reviews

As writers and readers, teachers and activists, we in the collective often find ourselves scrambling to keep abreast of the wealth of new publications in our fields. The lament is so familiar: “Why can’t there be more hours in the day?” This section aims to engage new scholarly exchanges on Latin America and to give our time-pressed colleagues a concise guide to major new works. Among the reviews scheduled to appear in it are reviews of new works on human rights, in particular the question of peace and judicial reform after terror, on the impact of decentralization on labor and welfare policies in Brazil, on the legacy of Nicaragua’s revolution in the post-Sandinista era, on the new indigenous politics, and on gender and capitalism. These new works reflect rapid shifts in politics and economy in the region and changes in our understanding of Latin America’s past. In addition to helping readers keep up-to-date on new works and ideas, the reviews will, where appropriate, assess how new works may enhance teaching. We encourage reviewers to consider whether the books under review will serve well in undergraduate or graduate settings or might usefully supplement classic texts. Finally, the reviews will locate new works within the larger debates that have long fueled the collective’s work. As a scholarly journal dealing with the political economy of capitalism, imperialism, and socialism in the Americas, Latin American Perspectives encourages reviewers to take up new ideas as they inform our basic understandings of power and struggles for social justice.

—Heather Williams

Mexican Immigrants under Siege

Commodified Labor and the Architecture of Exploitation

by Tamar Diana Wilson


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Repeated economic crises in Mexico during this century have continually augmented the numbers of contracted and undocumented workers seeking employment in the United States. Agricultural, manufacturing, and service enterprises have taken advantage of the low-cost labor of the undocumented and vulnerable workforce that assigns all working-class Mexican immigrants what Velázquez (1996) has called a “commodity identity,” involving an objectification of the alien “Other” (Kearney, 1997). The commodification and concomitant objectification of Mexican immigrants and the control over their presence and labor power are constituted in spatial, political, and ideological dynamics. The three books reviewed here focus on various aspects of this commodification and objectification through three different lenses, geography (Mitchell), political science (Calavita), and sociology (Dunn), and on a historical continuum.

In *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*, covering the period 1913 to 1942, Mitchell argues that labor history, with its power struggles and conflicts between growers and migrant laborers, has created and re-created the California landscape. Employing radical insights from geography, Mitchell contends that productive landscapes such as those of the California agricultural fields are founded, under capitalism, on class inequalities. Workers must be controlled, their embodied labor made available when and where it is needed, their revolts suppressed or minimized, their efforts to affect the spatial and material ordering of the landscape on their own behalf neutralized. Examining the organizational efforts of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the response of the social Darwinist and paternalistic Progressives, Mitchell focuses on farm workers’ strikes and rebellions and the attempts to co-opt them through state-initiated demands for more adequate housing facilities in the fields.

Minimally decent housing was proposed in order to enhance “worker contentment” through “tinkering” with the environment (1996: 55) and thus to undermine the unionizing efforts of “radicals” and deflect motivations to revolt against long hours, low wages, and difficult and unstable living and working conditions. Although some growers endorsed the provision of bunk houses and rudimentary sanitary facilities because it gave them more control over the workforce, others balked at such an investment in fixed capital, which merely represented a loss in profits. Growers avoided state laws such as the Labor Camp Sanitation Act by utilizing labor contractors, who were held exempt from legal provisions ensuring adequate housing facilities for the workers they employed. Growers enthusiastically greeted the increasing number of automobile and tent camps, new additions to the California landscape in the 1920s, which were run by third parties or simply permitted to exist by local law enforcement officials, as an externalization of mandated costs for workers’ daily reproduction. Resurgences of organizational activities in such camps were met by evictions, the sheriff’s departments aiding the growers in this effort.

In the 1920s (shortly after World War I and the Mexican Revolution), Mexican labor was increasingly recruited into California agriculture; its presence was
accompanied by a racialized view of Mexicans as a docile workforce naturally well-suited to field labor. In 1928, a Mexican workers’ strike against the cantaloupe growers of the Imperial Valley led to ideological attacks on foreign and domestic “communist agitators” but also to improvements in the conditions of farm labor camps located on growers’ property—a change in the landscape designed to neutralize worker militancy. Field laborers were, however, often enclosed in guarded compounds that they were forbidden to leave at night and to which suspected agitators and other outsiders were denied entry.

An oversupply of labor in the 1930s was followed by a shortage at the beginning of World War II. The Bracero Program (1942-1964) was a response to this shortage. Mitchell points out: “The Bracero Program reenacted the same issues that had governed California agriculture throughout the first half of the twentieth century: how could a ‘sufficient’ labor supply be made available when and where it was needed, and in such a manner that it was incapable of threatening the economic and political interests of growers?” (1996: 195). He underscores that the control elements incorporated into the Bracero Program were designed to counteract effective worker organization and action.

Calavita, in her Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the INS, takes up the issue of the worker control elements that evolved from the Bracero Program. She also examines in depth the contradictions of labor immigration policies under capitalism as illustrated by the cooperative/conflicting relationship of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the Department of Labor (DOL), and the growers. Calling her theoretical approach to understanding the workings of the capitalist state “dialectical structuralism,” Calavita focuses on the contradictions and conflicts inherent in class society, especially those concerned with the costs and benefits of employing an immigrant labor force. Such contradictions may be temporarily plastered over by new laws and administrative procedures, but these eventually generate new contradictions and conflicts.

Using previously unexplored archival materials, Calavita shows that while INS policies tended to advance the interests of growers, the agency was not co-opted by them completely. Following its mandate to halt illegal immigration, it modified administrative procedures and generated unforeseen innovations in order to ensure that growers would employ braceros rather than the cheaper and more flexible undocumented immigrants. In the early stages of the Bracero Program, contrary to binational recruitment provisions, the INS legalized whatever undocumented workers were found working in the fields and contracted them to the growers as braceros. Later, in order to ensure the growers a sufficiently docile, reliable, and hardworking labor force, the INS introduced the I-100 card system. Under this system the growers evaluated each worker. A good evaluation meant that the worker could be recontracted by any grower at the border. Over the protests of the Mexican government, the Mexican recruitment system was thereby bypassed as the INS generated a distinction between contracting (forbidden by the Mexican government at the border) and recontracting (not covered by the U.S-Mexico accords). Growing out of the I-100 system, under grower pressure, was the Special Program, which permitted growers to recontract designated workers over and over again. The I-100 card system was designed by the
INS not only to encourage the use of braceros over undocumented workers but also to reduce the time for inspection of braceros by its own overburdened personnel. The Department of Labor, authorized under the Bracero Program to certify labor shortages, successfully demanded an end to the I-100 cards, essentially converting temporary contract workers into a semipermanent labor force. In sum, according to Calavita, the solution to one contradiction—the economic utility of cheap immigrant labor versus the mandate to control the border and prohibit illegal entries—led to administrative innovations by the INS, but further contradictions arose in the wake of those innovations. Southwestern agriculture became even more heavily dependent on labor imported from Mexico, and the INS came into conflict with the DOL, whose mandate was to represent domestic workers and mediate class conflict between labor and capital.

Dunn, in *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home*, brings the reader up to the early 1990s on the subjects of border enforcement and the social/political/economic and military control of subordinated civilian populations seeking refuge and/or work in the United States. Dunn contends that the control apparatus in place since 1978, involving military rhetoric, military cooperation with the Border Patrol, and military equipment, technology, strategy, and tactics, is designed not to halt Mexican labor entirely but to regulate its flow (1996: 16). Deportations of Central Americans, in contrast, are a continuation of U.S. foreign policy. Looking at “low-intensity conflict doctrine” as it evolved in terms of combating guerrilla warfare and controlling civilian populations in the Third World, Dunn finds all of its constituent elements in place in the current policing of the U.S.-Mexico border. Examining Border Patrol funding and activities, its cooperation with military personnel, and equipment supply and technological innovations during the Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations, he documents a progressive weakening of the Posse Comitatus statute of 1879, which prohibits military involvement in domestic law enforcement activities. The military has aided in brush removal and road and wall construction along the border aimed at keeping out drug smugglers (but also regulating the flow of undocumented workers), lent equipment such as helicopters and light aircraft to the Border Patrol, and trained members of the Border Patrol in the use of such military technology as night-vision equipment, electronic intrusion-detection ground sensors, and automatic and semiautomatic military-issue rifles to be used in combating the drug trade, conceived of as a national security issue. Dunn points out that while the Border Patrol’s mandate was widened under the Reagan administration to include drug control activities, the equipment and technology used to combat drug trafficking can also be used and is used against any illegal border crossing.

Dunn illustrates point by point how low-intensity conflict doctrine has been used along the U.S.-Mexico border to control the flow of Mexican workers and effect the deportation of Central American refugees. He concludes that the militarization of the border can be interpreted as having four main aims: (1) reinforcing the stratification of power between the U.S. and Mexico at a time of increasing U.S. investment in that country, (2) reinforcing the illegal status of Mexican undocumented workers and thus reinforcing their economic subordination, (3) extending U.S. foreign policy objectives in Central America by evicting Central American immigrants and refugees, and
(4) securing “a region that was increasingly strategic economically and also potentially vulnerable to instability” (1996: 163).

For what they attempt to explain—Mitchell the formation and reformation of the California landscape in the interests of migrant labor control, Calavita the contradictory proliferation of administrative innovations in the interest of immigration control, Dunn the influence of military rhetoric, strategy, tactics, and technology in the interests of border control—these three volumes cannot be faulted. All three contribute innovative perspectives on the crisis of Mexican wage-labor immigration to the United States, the commodification and objectification of Mexican labor and laborers, and the workings of state and national government agencies in reinforcing this commodification and objectification. Inherent and sometimes explicit in each volume is the argument that Mexican laborers are especially useful because the costs of their reproduction can be externalized through periodic deportations or threats of the same, through labor control systems such as the Bracero Program, and through militarized regulation of illegal entry. The economic importance of production and reproduction (especially in times of sickness, unemployment, and old age, when undocumented immigrants return to Mexico) for those Mexican laborers only intermittently in the United States—a separation that results in increasing profits for capitalist employers of that labor but little cost for providing basic security for workers and their families for the system as a whole—has long been noted (e.g., Burawoy, 1975; Gómez-Quicioñes, 1981; Portes, 1978). The separation of production from reproduction is also the logical foundation of proposals to deny citizenship to the children of undocumented workers (Roberts, 1997), for the denial of social and medical services to undocumented women and children under the Illegal Immigration Reform and Individual Responsibility Act of 1996 and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (Welfare Reform Act) of the same year, for the proposal of a new H-2 temporary contract workers’ program (Chavez, 1997), and for Bush’s call for a new guest worker program.

That the elimination of the costs of reproduction of Mexican immigrant workers is a primary goal is confirmed by Mitchell’s documentation of growers’ reluctance to supply even minimally decent housing to migrant farm workers in the 1913-1942 period, Calavita’s analysis of the bracero program, designed to import only obedient workers who would eventually return to Mexico, and Dunn’s examination of the social control effects of the escalating low-intensity conflict on and near the U.S.-Mexico border. Taken together, these three volumes show that Mexican immigrant workers, especially and not exclusively farm workers, have always been under siege in the United States and are now increasingly so—a fact that can only complicate the effects of Mexico’s internal, though globally induced, economic crisis.

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Gender Struggles
The Undermining of Patriarchal Hegemony in Colonial Mexico

by Tamar Diana Wilson


Culture as contestation, contested patriarchal pacts, absolute versus contingent interpretations of patriarchal right, women’s weapons in a patriarchal society, the justification of the power of the elders over the young and of the elites and village authorities over the less affluent and the marginalized in terms of patriarchal templates on the societal level—these are some of the ideas Stern develops in his study of gender struggles in late colonial Mexico. Focusing on “subalterns” among the peasants of Morelos and Oaxaca and the “plebians” of Mexico City, Stern rests his analysis on the perusal of 708 violence and morality incidents registered in the criminal courts between 1760 and 1821. He shows how “patriarchal pacts” were continually contested and occasionally renegotiated by women. Whereas men generally sustained a view of absolute patriarchal right within their households (as the elders did within villages), women viewed their required submission and obedience as contingent upon the fulfillment of certain male obligations. The obligations included economic maintenance, avoidance of public flaunting of infidelities and of liaisons that diverted economic resources from the household, showing a modicum of respect to wives and daughters, and exercising restraint in domestic violence.

While subordinated within the patriarchal system, women nonetheless possessed certain weapons that they could use to resist a husband/father they considered unjust or noncompliant with his obligations as family patriarch. They could slow down on expected domestic services or tarry too long on extrahousehold chores. They could also stake claims in the public domain in at least four ways: pluralizing patriarchs, utilizing women’s networks, creating a public scandal, or resorting to magic—the last taken seriously in a society in which the belief in the efficacy of magic was pervasive. Pluralization of patriarchs involved seeking aid from consanguineal or affinal male kin, village elders, authorities, judges, or other men in positions of power, sometimes even lovers, to bring husbands into line. “Cross-overs” to a particular woman’s side, Stern argues, did not undermine patriarchal privilege but strengthened the power of the patriarchs called upon to sanction wayward men, who were often socially disruptive and relatively marginalized in any case.

That hierarchies of masculinity and power were characteristic of class-stratified peasant communities is a well-developed theme throughout Stern’s *Secret History of*.

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Gender. Elite men “feminized” subaltern men through insults, public beatings, and preying on their women. Such behavior was characteristic of the “vertical dimension” of masculinity and power, as Stern puts it. The result was a reactive, “counter-hegemonic masculinity” that stressed courage in the face of humiliation but also led to interpersonal violence in horizontal as opposed to vertical contexts and the strict enforcement (I might call it exaggeration) of masculine right in family contexts. Here Stern closely approaches arguing for an association between “machismo” or “hypermasculinity” (Pyke, 1996)—terms he eschews—and relative social/economic powerlessness. His avoidance of such an interpretation is partly due to his empathy with the plight of subaltern men and his desire to underscore the positive aspects of their alternative construction of masculinity. It ignores, however, the full implications of some aspects of subaltern masculinities (see McCloskey, 1996; Harvey, 1994).

Stern subtly differentiates the peasant patriarchy of Morelos from that of Oaxaca, where elders’ power contained the worse offenses of younger married men and women’s locally permissible recourse to kin in time of trouble strengthened their negotiating position. Stern also differentiates peasant patriarchies in both states from the patriarchal privilege (or lack of it) among plebians in Mexico City. In the city women’s economic opportunities, however marginal, enhanced their physical mobility and thus permitted the more effective pluralization of patriarchs and formation of women’s networks, while other factors associated with urbanization moved patriarchal pacts from contention to crisis. In a later period, as Stern points out, the crisis of patriarchy would spread to the countryside.

Stern provides students of both women’s subordination under patriarchy and “multiple masculinities” (Brod and Kaufman, 1994; Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994) with innovative and thought-provoking ideas that should be seriously considered.

Boyer’s Lives of the Bigamists, though undertheorized compared with Stern’s work, should be read in conjunction with it for an understanding of gender relations in colonial Mexico. Concentrating on the period between 1535 and 1789, Boyer analyzes 213 bigamy files collected during the Inquisition. Although most bigamists were men, women sometimes opted out of marriages in which they were subject to la mala vida (the sorry life) and sought other mates. This resonates with Stern’s idea of women’s contingent interpretations of patriarchal right and also illustrates the pluralization-of-patriarchs strategy carried to the extreme—marrying a second husband where Catholic law prohibited divorce from the first. Both Stern and Boyer use the example of physical punishment of wives, which, although accepted to a degree, was resisted as unjust if too violent or too recurrent; they also point out that wives rebelled in response to husbands’ blatant adultery, often out of fear of abandonment.

Boyer’s primary concern, like Stern’s, is with subaltern, relatively powerless, poor men and women. He makes the point that, rather than being deviants, the bigamists were attempting to conform to the pervasive ideal of adults ensconced in stable and legal marriages. Many, if not most, were men whose search for a livelihood often distanced them geographically from their first wives and children. In order to retain their labor, “masters” (employers) often encouraged laborers to marry relatives of theirs, even knowing of the existence of a previous spouse. Sometimes they provided laborers with their first wives, and there were often few emotional ties to hold men to these
arranged marriages when they moved on to new jobs. Indeed, masters sometimes refused to allow the wives provided to follow their husbands when they searched elsewhere for work.

Boyer’s account suggests the existence of large numbers of men roaming from place to place either as part of their work as muleteers, traveling vendors, and seamen or in their desperate search for work wherever they could find it as itinerant artisans, field hands, and laborers. Such widespread movement not only fomented bigamy—given a social order in which nonlegalized liaisons were under great social pressure to become legalized and single persons were under pressure to mate—but also led to the discovery of bigamists. Wives searched for their husbands through information networks spanning multiple locales, and people in towns gossiped with vendors and muleteers who traveled from one population center to another. Ultimately, many of the bigamists were brought to public attention.

Without developing the theoretical implications of his observations, Boyer documents that boys and young men often ran away from home to find work far away. One can only ask: Were they fleeing an unjust patriarch as many daughters in Stern’s account fled fathers who treated them like servants and similarly placing themselves in the service of a new patriarch? Unfortunately, little reference is made to ideas developed in the literature on patriarchy and gender relations, and there is no discussion of how the availability of wage labor opportunities changed family dynamics. Both omissions lead to a relative lack of conceptual sophistication in Lives of the Bigamists.

Although Stern’s analysis is elegantly theorized whereas Boyer’s monograph is far more descriptive than theoretical, both volumes offer insight into gender issues that should be absorbed not only by historians but also by sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists concerned with patriarchy in particular and with gender relations in general.

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Gender as a Category of Analysis
Moving Past Old Binaries
by Nichole Sanders


These three collections examine gender and its relationship to politics, class formation, and identity. All make important and fresh theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of gender in the Americas. They seek to move past certain binaries (public/private, Marxist/postmodernist) that have lost their analytical usefulness. They provide excellent historiographical background and serve as blueprints for future developments in feminist scholarship.

*Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice*, edited by Elizabeth Dore, is an attempt to bridge the seeming chasm between two major twentieth-century feminist traditions—Marxist feminism and postmodernist constructions of gender politics. It also examines the distinction between theory and practice, “highlighting innovative and often controversial aspects of the politics of gender in Latin American societies” (Dore, 1997: 9). Its nine essays take a multidisciplinary approach to the study of Latin American gender politics and challenge many assumptions (Dore, 1997: 10).

One of the most persistent myths about the Latin American family and its relationship to politics is the notion of public and private spheres. Scholars have long believed that women in Latin America were not politically active because of their subservient role in the private sphere, the home. Work and politics were considered strictly male domains. In contrast to those of the United States and Europe, in which women had a certain amount of authority, Latin American families were overtly patriarchal. These essays argue that public versus private is a false dichotomy. Tessa Cubitt and Helen Greenslade’s “Public and Private Spheres: The End of Dichotomy” and Anna M. Fernández Poncela’s “Nicaraguan Women: Legal, Political, and Social Spaces” show that women have been active politically even while they have been excluded from formal politics. Women’s political activism in Latin America has long exemplified the U.S. feminist assertion “The personal is the political.” The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, mentioned in Elizabeth Jelin’s “Engendering Human Rights,” show how women have been active politically in community organizations and in street demonstrations. Ann Matear’s “‘Desde la protesta a la propuesta’: The Institutionalization

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of the Women’s Movement in Chile” details how informal women’s groups and professional women’s organizations contributed to Chile’s redemocratization efforts. (Unfortunately, as Matear points out, democracy has served to co-opt official women’s groups and freeze out informal ones.)

These essays all effectively debunk a separate-sphere analysis, arguing that Latin American women have always been more active politically than such a dichotomy would suggest. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the public/private divide has historically been very important as a Latin American elite rhetorical device. Both Elizabeth Dore in “The Holy Family: Imagined Households in Latin American History” and Ricardo Cicerchia in “The Charm of Family Patterns: Historical and Contemporary Change in Latin America” point out that the myth of the patriarchal family has long allowed elites to promote policies that ignore the realities of family life in Latin America, serving to reinforce their own hegemony.

This collection also takes an important step in attempting to synthesize Marxist feminist scholarship and poststructuralist gender theory. Dore, in her introductory chapter, gives an excellent description of each paradigm. She suggests that it is no accident that postmodernism has become popular at the same time as neoliberal economic theory has gained ascendancy in Latin America, Britain, and the United States. She contends that both neoliberalism and postmodernist theory emphasize individual action and subjectivity while ignoring the material consequences of economic freedom for entire classes of people. With Jane Jaquette, she laments the fact that “class is disappearing as a category of analysis at the very moment when class differences are widening in Latin America” (Dore, 1997:16). Indeed, while postmodernism provides scholars with many useful avenues of inquiry, it is dangerous to overlook material reality.

Both Dore’s introductory chapter and Nanneke Redclift’s “Post-Binary Bliss: Towards a New Materialist Synthesis?” point out possibilities for future scholars of gender and politics in Latin America. Dore suggests that we take the best of both paradigms. She argues that class should remain an important focus of scholars but that postmodernist theory’s emphasis on multifaceted subjectivities allows a more nuanced interpretation of women and politics. Marxist theory has tended to ignore gender and ethnic diversity, arguing that racism and sexism will disappear along with capitalism. But, as Redclift asserts, “Class, gender and race do not simply intersect, in many ways they are/stand for each other” (Dore, 1997: 227). Postmodernist theory allows us to understand class as gendered and racialized. Thus, it suggests that these categories are not mutually exclusive and that all must be examined for fuller understanding of politics and the economy.

This collection serves as an excellent introduction to feminist debates in Latin American scholarship. Both Dore’s introductory chapter and Redclift’s conclusion provide clear and concise definitions of theoretical and discussion of historical issues, and the essays contribute effectively to the ongoing theoretical debate. For example, Dore’s own chapter shows how elite discourse on the family in Latin America has masked material realities. By skillfully using both postmodernist and material analysis, Dore shows how power is deployed. Because the essays are multidisciplinary as well, one gets a sense of feminist scholarship across the disciplines.
The variety of approaches proves invaluable to the study of gender and politics in Latin America.

*The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and the Ballot Box*, edited by John French and Daniel James, also takes innovative approaches to the study of gender and politics in Latin America. It examines working-class women and their relationship to the home, work, and both formal and informal politics. It makes important contributions to the study of labor and gender history, engages in the debate between material and postmodernist paradigms, and offers fresh methodological strategies.

This collection is anchored by an introduction summarizing the historiography of Latin American labor history. The editors contend that women have been largely left out of the picture, as have questions of “non-class forms of working class identity and mobilization found among workers (be they based on gender, race or ethnicity, religion or community)” (French and James, 1997: 6). They see their collection as an attempt to correct this oversight and, indeed, to take the study of Latin American women workers one step farther.

French and James argue that while adding women to the traditional narrative has been important to scholars’ understanding of history, a more comprehensive theoretical underpinning is necessary for an understanding of working-class identity and consciousness. They assert that looking at gender as a category of analysis provides a more complex and nuanced picture. One’s identity as male or female is not constituted in a vacuum. Exploring the relationship between men and women and not just women in isolation allows us to see how power is wielded and how identities and class consciousness are formed.

By adopting this line of inquiry, the collection is able to provide a much fuller picture of the worlds of Latin American women workers. These essays go beyond the issues of traditional labor history, such as the shift to wage labor and workers’ relationship to the means of production, to explore how working-class identity is formed and how that identity is gendered. For example, both Thomas Klubock and Heidi Tinsman examine issues of domestic violence. While spouse abuse is certainly not restricted to the working class, examination of how male violence is directed toward women in this class sheds light on issues of power and control, as well as issues of masculinity and femininity.

Much of this approach is indebted to postmodernism. It has been postmodernism that has provided the tools necessary to get at these women’s voices—voices that are often drowned out by those of their male compatriots or by those in power. The contributors to this volume engage in the debate outlined by Dore in her collection. French and James agree with Dore’s analysis: a materialist interpretation must be rounded out by other theoretical approaches, but the material must remain a part of the focus. Latin American labor history must of course look at work and material conditions to see how these women’s worlds were constituted, but it is only with the tools provided by postmodernist theory, such as an emphasis on discourse analysis and theories of representation and language, that we begin to reach the hidden voices of Latin American women workers.
One of these innovative methodological/theoretical approaches is the emphasis on oral history. While oral history has always been a useful tool in corroborating empirical evidence, this collection views it as a valuable source in its own right. All of the essays in this collection use oral testimony to a greater or lesser extent. Indeed, in their conclusion the editors assert that oral sources occupy a “place of pride” (French and James, 1997: 297) in the collection. Oral sources are seen as just as legitimate as written ones, both requiring careful interpretation. The use of oral testimony allows these scholars to “document the lives of those doubly silenced by virtue of their class and gender” (French and James, 1997: 298), and often these stories are extremely powerful. Essays such as Daniel James’s “‘Tales Told Out on the Borderlands’: Doña María’s Story, Oral History, and Issues of Gender,” Theresa R. Veccia’s “‘My Duty as Woman’: Gender Ideology, Work, and Working-Class Women’s Lives in São Paulo, Brazil, 1900-1950,” and Deborah Levenson-Estrada’s “The Loneliness of Working-Class Feminism: Women in the ‘Male World’ of Labor Unions, Guatemala City, 1970s,” all give voice to working women’s experiences and perceptions.

Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings, edited by Alma M. García, is an effort to give voice to U.S. women who, like Latin American working-class women, have often been overlooked not only by their compatriots but by the larger society as well. It is a collection of pieces—essays, editorials, speeches, and poems—written by Chicana feminist activists from the 1960s through the 1990s that serves to correct the mistaken perception of Chicana feminism as relatively new. Many of the articles were written in the 1960s and 1970s, as the Chicano movement gained force along with the black power movement, the civil rights movement, and the (second-wave) feminist movement, and address common themes. The Chicano movement shared with the black power movement its stress on cultural nationalism rather than just equality. Activists argued that difference should be a source of strength rather than shame. They maintained that the traditional patriarchal Chicano family, with the father in charge and the subservient wife at home, gave the community its moral superiority and served as a basis for resistance. Feminist demands challenged this base, and Chicana feminists were therefore labeled traitors to the cause. Many Chicanos believed that the real issues confronting the movement were racism and class inequities—that feminist issues were divisive and unimportant. Many of the articles in the collection deal with these issues. Male leaders reiterated “El problema es el gabacho, no el macho” (The problem is the white man, not the macho). Chicana feminists argued that only through eradication of machismo could the movement flourish.

Many Chicano activists considered the feminists white dupes and accused them of selling out their heritage. At the same time, many feminists, like other feminists of color, felt ill-at-ease with white middle-class feminists, whom they perceived as classist and racist, and did not see them as particularly sympathetic to their cause. In fact, at the first National Youth Liberation Conference held in 1969 in Denver, the Chicana workshop proclaimed that Chicanas did not want to be liberated. This statement highlights many of the contradictions Chicanas experienced within the movement. Some women agreed with many male leaders in seeing feminism as divisive to the movement, arguing that it was more important to remain focused on racism and
class exploitation. Other feminists saw “liberation” as a white woman’s demand and sought to distance themselves from what they saw as an exclusive white bourgeois movement.

Many of these issues persist today, even though Chicana feminists have achieved positions of power in the community as well as in academia. The movement itself, as it was articulated in the 1960s, no longer exists, and this gives Chicana feminists the distance needed to begin to analyze it and gain some perspective on its successes and failures. One group of feminists that has acquired a voice in the 1990s is Chicana lesbians, who feel they are oppressed not only by virtue of race, class, and gender but by their sexuality as well. They face many of the same issues as heterosexual Chicanas but argue that their lesbianism is often interpreted as an extreme rebuke to the Chicana community. Not only do lesbians have to contend with exclusion from the Chicano community as a whole but many lesbians feel that heterosexual Chicanas avoid them as well. This exclusion forces lesbian activists to the forefront of the Chicana feminist movement.

García’s work is an excellent addition to feminist scholarship. She succeeds in bringing together and empowering the work of an often neglected minority. She has organized her collection chronologically and thematically, with an introduction to each section. While at times the themes verge on the repetitive, the collection as a whole works very well. It would make a solid addition to any undergraduate or graduate course on the Chicano/a movement or on feminism in twentieth-century America.

These collections examine feminism and feminist scholarship 30 years after the second-wave feminist movement forced women’s issues into the academy. At first feminist scholarship focused on compensatory history—restoring women to the history from which they had been traditionally excluded. While this remains an important step, feminist scholars are enriching our understanding of traditional stories with an emphasis on gender as a category of analysis in studies of vital topics such as political economy and class formation. These collections challenge the notion that Marxism and postmodernism are mutually exclusive theoretical frameworks. Postmodernist theory suggests that subjectivity is created through more than just material conditions; materialists point out that the material still plays a vital role in shaping historical processes. Neither can be ignored. The editors of these volumes suggest that taking the best of both paradigms will allow a fruitful marriage of the two.

NOTES

1. A good example of elite manipulation of discourse is Susan Besse’s (1996) Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil, 1914-1940.
2. For another examination of Latin American labor history, see Viotti da Costa (1989).
3. Other works that rely effectively on oral testimony include Winn (1986) and Becker (1995).
4. Historically this has been the case. For an examination of how white feminists have often deliberately excluded women of color in the United States see Cott (1987) and Bederman (1995).
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Indigenous Peoples in Resistance
History with an Anthropological Perspective

by Karl Reitz


In recent years, anthropologists have turned away from the traditional study of isolated “exotic” groups to examine the complexity of cultures in motion, interacting with others (Rosaldo, 1993). These three books are examples of the application of an anthropological perspective to history. Each deals significantly with the resistance to colonization of indigenous peoples in Latin America.

Only Colchester’s clearly advocates for the right of anthropologists’ subjects to determine their own future. He sees the destruction of indigenous cultures and their home, the rainforest, as a result of continued exploitation by dominant economic forces. In comparison, Dumond’s work is strictly historical, with an unspoken assumption of objectivity, but it is probably not coincidental that his research on indigenous resistance to colonialism coincides with a contemporary rebellion in a contiguous area. Abercrombie’s book is more postmodernist than the others even though this perspective does not add to the value of his presentation. His work is made interesting by relating oral and written tradition.

In *Guyana, Fragile Frontier*, Colchester places the contemporary plight of the indigenous peoples of Guyana and the rainforest they inhabit in a broad historical context. He considers it important for the people to be able to maintain their cultures, which in turn entails the preservation of the rainforest. He shows that the region’s indigenous peoples have been interacting with Europeans for a long time and sometimes coerced to oppress each other. He does not present a picture of the “noble savage,” but he does make it clear that the current oppression in the name of “structural adjustment” is nothing more than a continuation of the historical exploitation of indigenous peoples and their forests.

Dumond carefully documents the Mayan Campesino Rebellion, in which people who identified themselves as Mayan more or less successfully held off the Spanish, Mexican, and Yucatecan authorities for more than 60 years. His sources primarily take the point of view of the colonizers, and he does not editorialize on them. He does, however, lament the lack of written sources that might provide insight into the

Karl Reitz teaches in the departments of sociology, peace studies, and mathematics at Chapman University. He is a senior research fellow for the Southwest Land Use Institute. His research interests center on the intersection between rural studies, environmental concerns, and indigenous rights.
perspective of the rebels themselves. Because he does not attempt to supplement written documentation with oral tradition (which surely must exist), his book perpetuates the tradition of history written in terms of the conqueror rather than the conquered. Nevertheless, it is an important record of a significant period in the long and continuous struggle of indigenous people’s resistance to centralized, oligarchic authority in Mexico.

Abercrombie’s work uses secondary sources along with ethnographic research to document the history of the Aymara people in the Andean highlands. The juxtaposition of historical records with oral tradition is an interesting contrast. Abercrombie shows that the nonliterate Inca method of recording or remembering history continues even though the external trappings of the contemporary community seem to reflect primarily that of the Spanish conquerors. One point that he seems to be making is that although resistance to colonialism can be found in ordinary practices, it is not pervasive; some practices are enthusiastically borrowed from the colonizers. I know of no one who would argue with this point. Nor would anyone argue with another of his main points: that the concept of history itself differs from one culture to another. Although the book uses the jargon-laden language of postmodernism, it contains sufficient data to keep it interesting.

All three booksshow that indigenous people do transform imposed social conventions into their own ways of being (Scott, 1990) and that not all imposed social forms are rejected or radically transformed. Some indigenous groups were not at all resistant to assisting colonizers in subjugating other indigenous groups or adopting introduced weapons that would assist them in defeating their traditional enemies. Although Colchester accurately discusses some such instances, he tends to gloss over them, probably because of his sympathetic view of indigenous groups. Abercrombie similarly exhibits an uncritical view of indigenous collaboration with colonizers. Dumond is strictly factual in his discussions of this issue.

Many anthropologists have recognized their responsibility with respect to the debt they owe indigenous peoples for the many insights they have provided (Fixico, 1998). It is often argued that one cannot morally write about the exploitation of indigenous groups without taking action. Many have responded to this challenge by working actively on their subjects’ behalf (Campbell, 1993) in a range of support organizations such as Cultural Survival, the Rainforest Action Network, and Abya Yala. Some academics have affiliated themselves directly with indigenous-led activist organizations. Indigenous organizations, for their part, have recognized the value of aligning themselves with environmental organizations, since they see their cultural survival as linked to the survival of the ecosystems that they consider home (Brysk, 1994). Such attempts produced mixed results depending upon the degree to which internal divisions and outside dominance interfere (Varese, 1996). Colchester’s book is clearly within this movement. The other two books take no position with regard to action.

All three books have a great deal of merit. Only the Colchester book will be accessible for the average undergraduate. It is an excellent source of information on the interaction of indigenous people, a progressive government, the environment, and the effect of neoliberalism in Guyana. Dumond’s book, thorough and well written, is destined to be a standard reference on a part of the history of Mexico. Abercrombie’s
work is an addition to the literature challenging the idea that indigenous people maintain their cultural integrity by hiding it under a gloss of the oppressor’s culture (see Kearney, 1996).

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