

## LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

*LA MUJER, UNA INCAPAZ COMO EL DEMENTE Y EL NIÑO (SEGÚN LAS LEYES LATINOAMERICANAS)*. By MARÍA GABRIELA LERET DE MATHEUS. (Mexico: B. Costa-Amic Editor, 1975. Pp. 333.)

*WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY. THEIR LIVES AND VIEWS*. Edited by JUNE E. HAHNER. (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 1976. Pp. 181. \$7.25.)

*POWER AND PAWN. THE FEMALE IN IBERIAN FAMILIES, SOCIETIES AND CULTURES*. By ANN M. PESCATELLO. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976. Pp. 281. \$15.95.)

The systematic study of women's participation in the history of any country was not regarded as a separate or even a serious intellectual pursuit until a decade ago. However, today North American historians have created an already significant body of literature on the diverse aspects of women's role in the history of the United States. Biographies, period studies, monographs on institutions or associations, anthologies for classroom use, and audio visual teaching aids have been developed. The energetic efforts of younger historians and the recognition granted to their work have obliterated the original doubts of many. Women's history is a fait accompli. This does not mean that boundaries or objectives are well defined. At present, the practitioners of this kind of history debate issues that will help to refine and further develop the results already accomplished. Such discussions center on sources, methodology, periodization and on the paramount question of whether women's history should focus on women's own experience or on women as part of society.

The intensive growth of women's history in the United States has spurred interest in women of other geographical areas, although the output has been smaller, and has concentrated on Europe more than on other continents. Latin American women's history has not been well cultivated, in the last decade—or at any other previous time. Works on this topic in Spanish far surpass those written in English, but many of them are of indifferent quality.<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists so far have produced the larger number of titles on Latin women available in English.<sup>2</sup> Historical studies have lagged noticeably behind. When James Lockhart devoted one chapter of his work *Spanish Peru* to women, he was quite perceptive to the changing winds. Since then, the increase in the number of publications dealing with the history of Latin women has been slow. A number of monographs are scattered in books of essays or in academic journals.<sup>3</sup> Book-length studies devoted to the exploration of the role of women in the development of Latin America are scarce.<sup>4</sup> Two of the most recent publications in English and the work of a Venezuelan author are here under review.

These three books have only one thing in common: their subject matter.

Otherwise, they represent three different methodological approaches to the topic, yielding markedly different results. María Gabriela Leret de Matheus, a Venezuelan lawyer, disturbed by what she regards as the "inherent discrimination" suffered by Spanish American women, collected in one volume the current legislation of Spanish American nations, which she claims puts most women in a situation of institutional and social inequality. June Hahner, a historian, has edited an anthology of women's writings as a key to discovering their intimate world. In her words, the book "endeavors to let Latin American women speak for themselves. . . . The selections reflect the experiences of a variety of women in Latin America in different periods, countries and economic and social circumstances viewed from their own perspective." Ann Pescatello, another historian, after having explored the subject matter in previous shorter works, undertook the task of writing a book that would be "a summary of what is known of women in Iberian families and societies . . . and a contribution to the synthesis of female history in general."

In her legal study, Leret de Matheus has compared the most recent issues of the Spanish American civil codes on topics affecting women such as betrothal, control of children and property, marital fidelity, divorce, concubinage, and widowhood. All these areas involve the social interrelation of men and women. The author does not stress the historical evolution of the legislation. She provides, however, a brief historical introduction to each of the topics that makes the reader aware that Spanish civil laws were already male-oriented by the time of the codification of the Laws of Toro (1515). In addition, the influence of the Code Napoleon in the nineteenth century was extremely important. The adoption of many of its premises eliminated certain prerogatives that women enjoyed under Spanish laws, making the civil codes of independent Spanish America very restrictive toward women.

This is both a source book and a protest book. As a source of information this work serves its purpose well. The author has scanned efficiently all the civil codes and has formed a quick reference book for those in need of such data. As a protest book, it also makes a case. The writer would like a situation of simple equality for both sexes. This situation is wanting in the majority of the Spanish American countries due to overt or subtle civil discrimination in all areas of male-female interrelations. None of the civil codes offers complete equality although a small minority comes very close to it.

Having established this, little else remains to be done with this material. Such research, although necessary, is almost self-defeating. This method has limited capabilities to generate new questions. A shift of emphasis becomes necessary in order to gain other perspectives that are also part of women's history. Beyond a well-stated and documented premise lies the problem of learning about the practical application of the law. The theoretical *cul de sac* of a book or books such as this must be superseded by further inquiry into the manner by which the legal statutes have restrained, modified, and, in general, shaped the lives of the women—and men—subject to them. Legal case histories, criminal records, evidence of the ill-effects of the negation of civil and political rights, are all indispensable to prove that women's legal inequality has had inhibiting con-

sequences on women's potential and behavior.<sup>5</sup> Such material is essential to understand the character of male-female relationships in Latin societies, not as prescribed by the law, but in daily real situations. As a lawyer, Leret de Matheus has accomplished her task, but the subject deserves to be picked up by the social scientist or the historian.

The works of Hahner and Pescatello are the latest additions to the small collection of historical titles available in English on Latin women. Hahner's anthology uses excerpts of women's writings from the sixteenth through the twentieth century in search for women's own point of view. This approach has been suggested by Gerda Lerner, Ann Firor Scott, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg—historians of women in the United States—as one of the most fruitful avenues for the investigation of the history of women. Hahner's book is the first attempt to use the method with Latin American women.

This work demonstrates the unevenness of the historical sources. The colonial period remains the most difficult to illustrate due to the relatively small numbers of known printed writings by women about themselves and their relations with the world. Material from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries form the bulk of the book. Education, accepted as desirable for women in the nineteenth century, gave them the possibility of writing and, having gained access to the pen, women themselves opened a new chapter in their history. The proliferation of women's writings in the twentieth century is little short of revolutionary, and yet is one of the least discussed changes in social history. Using the example of Latin America, it is worthwhile to consider the difficulties involved in ferreting out of colonial documentation evidence of women's personal thoughts. This situation cut across class and was mostly determined by sex. Men, who left far more numerous tracks of their actions and evidence of their motivations, had the common advantage of a greater access to education. Most women, including those of the higher social classes, did not have this asset until late in the nineteenth century. However, it is true that once they had it, they started using it. As a result, today we may read in this anthology such diverse documents as the diary of a school girl in Minas Gerais, the feelings of a slum-dweller in Rio de Janeiro, or the messages of female political leaders.

In general, anthologies serve the purpose of stimulating readers to discover for themselves the message conveyed by the sources. The selection of the examples used is often the main source of disagreement among scholars, who are likely to differ on what they consider to be significant material. Hahner limited herself to choosing from available printed materials. Her selections are representative enough to please the orthodox taste and introduce the nonexpert reader to the discussion of several topics. This is a book designed for teaching; its audience is the college student. Yet, most of the excerpts are greatly rewarding as revelations of universes never imagined by those who are exposed only to conventional histories.

Collections of documents have their intrinsic limitations. They give a rather fragmented view of reality that demands the support of a textbook or a general study. They may represent only one school of historical interpretation. This anthology is an honest effort. It conveys its message simply and aspires to

be inspirational rather than comprehensive. In this respect, the length of the book is disappointing, and the publishers should be blamed for that. A larger number of selections would have made it a more useful tool for teaching.

Ann Pescatello's work attempts the grand synthesis of women's history in Iberian societies, in the three continents where Spain and Portugal left the imprint of their cultural heritage. Since it was in the New World that Iberian values rooted most deeply, the book is mostly on Latin American women, with five chapters out of nine devoted to this continent. Two introductory chapters survey quickly the European and Iberian backgrounds. Two other chapters cover Africa and Asia, and the rest study Spanish and Portuguese America from pre-Columbian times to the present.

The task of writing a comprehensive history of women in Iberian societies presents almost insurmountable challenges and difficulties. Since in none of these areas is there a body of consistently good historical writings on women or the family, Pescatello has relied on available sources such as travelers' accounts, anthropological studies, area handbooks, and the writings of social scientists in print. Several primary sources are quoted but there is no evidence that much new research was carried out. Working with such sources it is difficult to achieve sustained quality, consistent topical information, or a constant sense of purpose and direction. Although there is a significant amount of useful information in this volume, it bears certain marks of serendipity resulting from the intrinsic diversity of the material used.

The picture that emerges from the perusal of so vast an area and so broad a period has the character of a patchwork: bright but ultimately confusing. Too many topics are broached but not followed through. A number of important subjects of study are hinted at with no full development. The writer acknowledged that her "methodological and material routes often had to be ad hoc." However, the results of such improvisation are not necessarily satisfactory. Methodological "ad hocness" must be overcome in order to give solidity to a field of studies that should become an important part of social history.

Pescatello's main theme is the tension arising from women's double role as wielders of power and as pawns or tools of men in the family and society. The tension is never resolved, although there is more evidence on the side of the pawns than on that of power. The author suggests that the study of women be carried out in the context of the family and the household, or in the groups where they function. Assuming that such other groups include feminine institutions, feminist associations, labor groups, etc., this framework would still miss the consideration of women's own historical experience, as underscored above. Doubtless, women's history cannot be studied without reference to the family and women's role within it; the study of feminine institutions is also essential in order to understand the results of women's socialization, and as the vehicles of power available to them. Nevertheless, not all such groups had cohesiveness enough to have a commonality of goals shared by all its members. Though participation in such activities could have been an important part of many women's lives, for others it was only incidental or temporal. This is why other dimensions are necessary.

Pescatello concedes that her work is a summary of *already* known material and she encourages further monographic work. The conclusion one inevitably reaches is that attempts to write comprehensive histories of women in Latin American or in Iberian societies should perhaps wait a few more years until more monographs lay down the necessary foundations for sound generalizations. The task of synthesis, although commendable, is as yet premature.

Regardless of their respective merits or faults, these three studies make an important contribution: they point out the necessity of considering gender as a factor in history. Sex determined different treatment, social role, attitudes, behavior, thoughts, and perceptions in women. This was—and is—due partly to socialization and prescription, and partly to intrinsic physical differences. Such variables need recognition in social history in order to bring a balance to what otherwise will remain as an incomplete and distorted reconstruction of past societies.

ASUNCIÓN LAVRIN  
Howard University

#### NOTES

1. Meri Knaster, *Women in Spanish America: An Annotated Bibliography from Pre-Conquest to Contemporary Times* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1977).
2. For examples see the works of JoAnn Aviel, Elsa Chaney, Lucy Cohen, Mary Elmen-dorf, Cornelia Flora, Jane Jaquette, Susan Kaufman Purcell, Nora Kinzer, and Evelyn P. Stevens.
3. James Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532–1560: A Colonial Society* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968). For other recent printed additions to the historical literature on Latin women see the works of Elinor Burkett, Mary C. Hollander, Louisa Hoberman, Asunción Lavrin, Cynthia Little, Anna Macías, Colin MacLachlan, Ann Pescatello, Donald Ramos (marriage and the family), and Susan Soeiro.
4. See Verena Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba. A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Silvia M. Arrom, *La mujer mexicana ante el divorcio eclesiástico (1800–1857)* (México: SepSetentas, 1976); Charles R. Boxer, *Women in Iberian Expansion Overseas, 1415–1815: Some Fact, Fancies and Personalities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
5. Arrom and Martínez-Alier discuss legislation and actual cases recorded in Mexican and Cuban tribunals.