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LESSONS FROM BRAZILIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Teresita Martínez-Vergne

More than any other country in Latin America, Brazil can claim rich diversity of geography, economic activity, natural resources, and population within its borders. The immensity of the territory alone allows it to encompass seven ecosystems: the Atlantic Forest, the Caatinga, the Cerrado, the Pantanal, the Pampas, coastal ecosystems, and Amazonian forests. Brazil produces coffee, soybeans, sugar, cattle, wood, drugs, iron ore, gold, and precious stones — for local consumption and for export — in its vast territory. Its population of 170 billion originated principally in the South American continent, Portugal, and Africa, but also, later, in Japan, Italy, Germany, and other European countries. The country prides itself as well on its unique political development. Casting aside twenty years of military rule beginning in the mid-1960s as an anomaly, historians point to the development of a Brazilian sense of self in the early years of colonial exploitation, the nonviolent consummation of independence in the early nineteenth century, and the hopeful passage into the twentieth century with a republican form of government.

Despite the self-satisfaction that their unique condition in the Southern Hemisphere elicits, Brazilians will matter-of-factly almost always point out the contrasts and contradictions that have marked the country's historical trajectory. To this day, Brazil is heavily populated only on the coast, so that most of its 3.2 billion square miles remain uninhabited. The three coastal geographical regions (the Northeast, East, and South), which

make up 36 percent of the territory, contain 91 percent of the population. Efforts to move the population away from the sea—the most notable of which was the establishment in 1960 of a new capital, Brasília, 600 miles inland in the state of Goiás—remain largely ineffective. Brazil struggles as well with deep-seated inequities in income distribution and regional development. The top 10 percent of the population possesses 50 percent of the wealth, while the poorest 10 percent holds 0.8 percent of the national income. The South and East account for 86 percent of the gross national product, while the huge North remains poor and underdeveloped. Moreover, Brazil's non-White citizens—about 40 percent of the population, according to government figures—suffer from a lack of educational opportunities, adequate housing, stable employment, and limited opportunities. Concentrated in the North and Northeast, indigenous and African-descent groups face high infant mortality rates, poor diets, and low wages as part of their daily existence. Efforts to revitalize the economy compete with the campaign to preserve the country's biodiversity. Ultimately, Brazil risks permanent environmental damage as the rain forest is consumed for industrial purposes.

Fortunately, the combination of the multiplicity of experience and the tendency toward periodic self-examination has resulted in an incredibly rich exchange of opinions, information, points of view, and policy alternatives. In a month's intellectual journey in the country, I had the opportunity to engage Brazilian colleagues in various disciplines, absorb popular opinions, experience daily life, and chat unceremoniously with historians about their academic interests, my experiences in the field, and other more general concerns. For the purposes of my research, this translated into a more focused exploration of the embracement of subaltern groups in elite discourses of citizenship and progress in Latin America in the early twentieth century. In addition, the subject of this faculty seminar addressed issues of power that have been central to my teaching and, more broadly, to the Latin American Studies Program at Macalester College.

My research on the Dominican Republic lends itself to comparative reading and discussion on the position of subaltern groups,¹ variously defined, in elite characterizations of the national identity at the turn of the century. Women, landless

peasants, and immigrants began to form part of the urban proletariat in Dominican cities in the last decades of the nineteenth century as the sugar boom attracted thousands of people in search of work. In Santo Domingo, the capital of the country and historically the most populous city, and in San Pedro de Macorís, which grew from a fishing village to a plantation complex and commercial hub in just twenty years, the working class appeared increasingly in journalists' writings, in photographers' images, in illustrators' representations, as the subject of travelers' observations, on the margins of government reports, and at the center of lesser criminal and civil procedures. A select group of Dominicans, the formulators of a relatively coherent discourse of progress, also noted, albeit obliquely, the presence of their subordinates in a changing social and economic context. As they impugned the foreign domination and bureaucratic corruption that had characterized the government of Ulises Heureaux until it collapsed in 1899, this intellectual elite pinned its hopes on a new combination of social, political, and economic forces. The ensuing public debate over the country's capacity to coalesce around a common definition of progress made manifest their worst fears and highest aspirations for the human components of the island. These same processes are in evidence all over Latin America, and Brazil is no exception.

My courses, which form part of the Latin American Studies curriculum, also benefitted from various interactions in Brazil. My teaching emphasizes, inevitably and undeviatingly, the social consequences of sweeping economic forces, such as rubber extraction in Brazil at the turn of the century, coffee production since the late eighteenth century on both islands and the mainland, or sugar manufacturing in several places at different times. In more specialized courses, I focus on the interplay between dominant and subordinate economic and political agents in a changing landscape affected in turn by global market forces. In "The Politics of Food," land tenure patterns, international attention to biodiversity, trade practices, technological advances, and other considerations inform our discussion of ways of producing and distributing food. In "Women in Latin America," we explore how the Church, social hierarchy, economic structures, political apparatus, and even individual decisions affect the position of women in various Latin American

societies. Students in my classes learn that each negotiation over space, time, and nature of activity is invariably measuring the power reserves of historical actors at any one point in time. I emphasize the ways human beings hold, control, express, and dispose of power — whether through the command of material resources (in my teaching), the production of various discourses (in my research), or the application of brute force (an aspect of power that does not interest me half as much as the other two). Brazil, then, became another site to explore how hegemony is negotiated within a country's boundaries and transnationally.

I. Elite Discourses and Working-Class Lives

The formal comparative perspective that I obtained while in Brazil through readings, seminar meetings, and conversations, as well as casual exchanges with friends and colleagues,² provoked me to think in novel ways about the construction of elite national discourses and their relationship to the daily lives of working-class families. The body of literature I came across included writings on love lives and practices, female crime, prostitution, the informal economy, and factory work, some of which I examine in my own work. The sources tapped by Brazilian authors include trial records, police complaints, municipal ordinances, census material, newspaper articles and advertisements — the conventional tools of the social historian — and some unorthodox ones, such as fictional literature, both popular and elite. In other words, using mostly materials written by the dominant classes, Brazilian historians have uncovered not only the attempts at domination and the consequent resistance, but, more important, how several different understandings of what is pertinent information and what is appropriate behavior clash and dovetail to shape urban life.

Two outstanding examples serve to make my point. In *Meninas Perdidas*, ninety-nine “deflowerment” cases, accusations of sexual aggression, and denunciations of “attempts against decency” serve to capture the moral values of both elite and working classes, patterns of sexual behavior, and definitions of leisure activity. Although accusers and defendants used the dominant gendered discourse, Martha de Abreu Esteves notes, the objectives were very different. Working-class women who

demanded marriage from the men who had “deflowered” them were probably less concerned with family honor than they were with the economic burden a “fatherless” child represented. Equally important might have been the possibility of marrying the loved one against the patriarchal will, pinning down a good match or permanently securing a fling, or gaining respectability among neighbors and relatives. Esteves also uses these cases to point to a different set of moral exigencies in the working class; references to unaccompanied night outings on the part of women, with oblique mention of sexual activity, were all too common for anyone to believe that working-class women subscribed to the elite code of conduct in anything but word. Finally, the author disentangles the complex web of social interactions that witnesses inadvertently revealed in their statements to show the insidious workings of race, class, and gender in urban Brazil: White elite men had power over working-class colored women not only because of their economic position, but also because of the universal recognition that Whiteness and maleness carried with them privileged status.³

Sidney Chalhoub’s work is also representative of a skillful use of sources to get at notions of how contemporaries constructed their world. In *Trabalho, Lar e Botequim* (Work, Home, and Bar), he uses Zé Galego, a factory worker who kills a man over a woman, to contrast perceptions of time, of appropriate conduct, and of womanhood, among others, between elite and popular actors. The authorities, for instance, defined the crime as occurring in roughly one night, while Zé’s acquaintances and other witnesses provided a more involved story of love, betrayal, reconciliation, and disappointment over the course of months. Violence appeared to be a legitimate recourse for Zé and his cohort; not so for the apparatus of vigilance. The woman in question, from the perspective of police officers, was nothing but a “slut,” although all the men who testified could understand why she had incited such passion. Chalhoub reinforces this point when he explains that women were in high demand for their community-building skills in an otherwise hostile environment and cites census statistics to show that there were more men than women in Rio de Janeiro at the time.⁴

Although documentation in Brazil, as everywhere, holds the view of those who wrote it, these and other cutting-edge histori-

ans have consistently mined available sources to examine how people adapted to circumstances. The daily negotiations those in power engaged in to shape the desired social order — contained in every court file, tax record, police complaint, and town council petition — allow the historian to reconstruct notions of neighborhood, of community, of nation. Insofar as politics is what happens to people and what they do about it, the plethora of rumors, misunderstandings, and false perceptions that are a function of social life probably depict the past more faithfully than coherent notions of “class interests,” “collective behavior,” and “group demands” assembled by historians.⁵

II. The Deployment of Power at the Turn of the Century

Although perhaps not as deliberate or as “politically correct” as North American historians, Brazilians have delved profoundly into the race, class, and gender trilogy that is inescapable in a U.S. classroom in the 1990s. Recent historiography on the turn of the century, in fact, does not fail to mention abolition, immigration, urbanization, and industrialization, processes that inevitably forced both contemporary and later writers to consider people of color, the working class, and women as valid historical actors. The efforts of this new generation are directed as much to writing total history (as demonstrated above) as they are to correcting the long-standing interpretation of Brazil as a product of slavery and colonialism, the most famous exponent of which is Gilberto Freyre. With the addition of feminism, Marxist scholars, for the most part, have drawn parallels between the subordination of women and the colonial slave mode of production, and between our understanding of women’s positions and the viewpoint of male contemporary observers and current writers. Brazil’s redefinition of social, political, and economic life at the turn of the century becomes, then, an opportunity to explore reconfigurations of power along class, race, and gender lines.⁶

Brazil’s entry into twentieth-century capitalism necessitated a stable work force, now composed of men and women who were legally free to choose their occupation. The subjection of freedmen and -women, working-class Brazilians of all colors, and mostly White immigrants to the economic demands of the dom-

inant classes rested on the re-articulation of power, a most pertinent example of which was the reinforcement of the social hierarchy through the continued obedience of Black servants in urban homes. Uniformity in the factory and morality in the home were part and parcel of elite efforts to conform working-class behavior to their desire for order. Fearing disease, ignorance, and social unrest, *cariocas* (residents of Rio de Janeiro) resorted to cleaning up the city. During prefect Pereira Passos's beautification campaign, the working class was marginalized to the urban periphery (and so, to the fringes of capitalism); factory workers were placed in *vilas operárias* (company towns); the poor were evicted from the infamous *cortiços* (tenements) they occupied in the heart of the city; and prostitutes were persecuted, all in the name of "civilizing" the capital.⁷

One of the themes for which the literature is richest and that lends itself to the exploration of the intersections of class, gender, and race is prostitution. As in other Latin American countries, prostitutes were as common a sight and as part of urban low life as drunkards, idiots, street urchins, peddlers, beggars, and so on. They became a "problem" at the end of the nineteenth century, when bourgeois sensibilities reacted to what they considered scandalous behavior, scant dress, and uncouth speech and mannerisms. Because slave prostitution was not unusual, many of the sexual workers even after abolition in 1889 were women of color. Prostitutes were also associated with disease, contagion, and unsanitary conditions. Brazilians may have looked to "gay Paris" to convince themselves that habitual promiscuity was just an alternative lifestyle, a fascinating one at that, but the reality was that prostitutes were just poor, uneducated, and unemployed women, and that their living conditions were deplorable. The reexamination of prostitution went hand in hand with other redefinitions of Brazilianness prompted by industrialization and urbanization.⁸

Historical works on prostitution are but one example of how the historiography on this important moment of Brazil's trajectory into modernity deals evenly with contemporary constructions of class, gender, and race. The conflation of race, class, and gender to deploy power is particularly transparent in the early twentieth century, and the "problem" of prostitution facilitates its examination. The preoccupation with sex on the part of the

state, then, becomes one aspect of “the articulation of the notion of work and the project of the masters of power and capital to make of the young republic a tropical extension of European civilization and economy.” The new Brazil embraced only hard-working individuals — preferably White, who formed family units to educate their children to do the same — and rejected those who were not.⁹

III. A Note on Globalization

The historical context in which all of these academics, including myself, have written and continue to write is what we would now call globalization — Latin America’s entrance into world markets, increased movement of peoples, the modernization (read “Europeanization”) of cities, industrial (read “U.S.”) patterns of work, etc. As commentators of the past, they are interested in exploring how different sectors of the population contribute to shaping daily life and, as an extension, to forming the nation. Since historical actors are unknowingly participating in global processes, it is the task of the social historian to study what are basically survival strategies, which include employment, social networks, and public assistance.¹⁰ In embarking on such a course as a teaching and research tool, notions of power, then and now, become central to our understanding of human nature and the course of events.

Notes

1. Subaltern studies is a relatively new field. The best introduction is *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
2. Besides our speakers, who are featured in this issue, I had the opportunity to meet with Sidney Chalhoub of the Department of History at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Fernando Novais of the Department of History at both the Universidade de São Paulo and the Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Maria Luiza Marcilio of the Department of History at the Universidade de São Paulo, Albertina Costa Oliveira of the Fundação Carlos Chagas, Eduardo Silva of the Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, and Cecília Sardenberg of the Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre a Mulher at the Universidade Federal da Bahia. I thank them profusely for their time, guidance, interest, and kindness.
3. Martha de Abreu Esteves, *Meninas perdidas: os populares e o cotidiano do amor no Rio de Janeiro da Belle Époque* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1989), 30 – 32, 203–204.

4. Sidney Chalhoub, *Trabalho, lar e botequim: o cotidiano dos trabalhadores no Rio de Janeiro da Belle Époque* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986), 20, 155–56, 164, 230.
5. Chalhoub, *Trabalho*, 24; Maria Odila Silva Dias, *Power and Everyday Life: The Lives of Working Women in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, trans. Ann Frost (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 6–7; Cecília Sardenberg, “In the Backyard of the Factory: Gender, Class, Power, and Community in Bahia, Brazil” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1997), 17.
6. Good examples of explorations of social groups in this period are Chalhoub, *Trabalho*; Sidney Chalhoub, *A história nas histórias de Machado de Assis: Uma interpretação de Helena* (Campinas: Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Primeira Versão, UNICAMP, 1991); Sandra Lauderdale-Graham, *House and Street: The Domestic World of Servants and Masters in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Rachel Soihet, *Mulher e violência no Rio de Janeiro (1890–1920)* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, 1985); and Rachel Soihet, *Condição feminina e formas de violência: Mulheres pobres e ordem urbana, 1890–1920* (Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 1989). Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, trans. Samuel Putnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) is the classic interpretation of the Brazilian character. Mary Del Priore, *A mulher na história do Brasil* (São Paulo: Contexto, 1989), 15, characterizes Freyre’s contribution as follows: “Undressing the warm and sensual bodies of the black slaves in constant sexual contact with their masters, Freyre discovers the marble-like bodies, because they are white and cold, of the ladies without pleasure.”
7. Martha de Abreu Esteves, *Meninas perdidas*, 204; Esteves, *En nome “da moral e dos bons costumes”: Discursos jurídicos e controle social, Rio de Janeiro, primeiro decado do século XX* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, 1985), 1; Lauderdale-Graham, *House and Street*, 22; Teresa A. Meade, “Civilizing” Rio: *Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City, 1889–1930* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Teresa Meade, “‘Living Worse and Costing More’: Resistance and Riot in Rio de Janeiro, 1890–1917” in *Journal of Latin American Studies* 212 (May 1989), 252–53; Margareth Rago, *Do cabaré ao lar: A utopia da cidade disciplinar* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1985), 176, 205; Soihet, *Condição*, 8.
8. June E. Hahner, *Emancipating the Female Sex: The Struggle for Women’s Rights in Brazil, 1850–1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 94, 96–97; June E. Hahner, *Poverty and Politics: The Urban Poor in Brazil, 1870–1920* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 188; Lauderdale-Graham, *House and Street*, 62; Lená Medeiros de Menezes, *Os estrangeiros e o comércio do prazer nas ruas do Rio (1890–1930)* (Rio de Janeiro: Arquivo Nacional, 1992).
9. Chalhoub, *Trabalho*, 29.
10. Carmen Barroso, *Mulher, sociedade e estado no Brasil* (São Paulo: Brasiliense e UNICEF, 1982), 14–15.