



Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 2008, 299-304  
[www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente](http://www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente)

## Review/Reseña

Jocelyn Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano, eds., *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

### **A Woman's Place: Gender Struggles in Post-Revolutionary Mexico**

**Robert Buffington**

University of Colorado—Boulder

Mary Kay Vaughan asserts in her introduction to *Sex in Revolution* that women's role in the 1910 Mexican Revolution and especially in the "revolutionary" decades that followed has been underappreciated and understudied, despite decades of feminist scholarship on the topic. One reason, she argues, is that "skeptics (until recently, the majority of Mexican historians) derided the act of exploring Mexican women's history as one of feminine romantic willfulness: the search for small groups of insignificant actors in obscure places" (23). As Vaughan sees it, the major obstacle has

been the need to develop “new languages with which to read accepted texts and processes” (23). The development of these new languages, then, has been part of an “ongoing process of discovery” (23) that has finally begun to pay serious dividends. One of those dividends is this excellent collection of essays on gender, politics, and power in modern Mexico.

The essays in *Sex in Revolution* are divided into four parts, framed by two introductions (Carlos Monsiváis and Mary Kay Vaughan) and two epilogues (Lynn Stephen and Temma Kaplan). It will come as no surprise to anyone acquainted with his cultural criticism that Monsiváis’s introduction is elusive, anecdotal, insightful, and loaded with an astonishing array of cultural references from popular songs (“Adelita”) to obscure chroniclers (Salvador Quevedo y Zubieta, Benita Galeana) to classic novels of the revolution (by Nellie Campobello, Mariano Azuela, Agustín Yáñez, and Elena Garro). These sometimes curious juxtapositions—a Monsiváis trademark—expose the intimate and often unexpected links between historical events and cultural production, and in so doing contribute in an important way to “the ongoing discovery of new languages” noted by Vaughan.

Part One, “Embodying Revolutionary Culture,” focuses on women’s self-fashioning, media representations of women’s bodies, and the controversies generated by the new possibilities for women that emerged during and after the Revolution. In the first essay, Gabriela Cano explores the transformation of small-town girl Amelia Robles into Zapatista Colonel Amelio Robles—a revolutionary act of self-fashioning that “was not simply due to a pragmatic desire to enjoy the social advantages of men, but rather the product of a deeper, more vital desire to radically transform the female identity assigned to him at birth in order to make himself masculine in every aspect of life” (37). Drawing on interviews, photographs, military records, and local museum exhibits, Cano’s analysis reveals the contradictory tangle of “truths” about Amelio/Amelia Robles produced by military authorities (who accepted her claims to masculine identity and a veteran’s pension), hometown historians (who insisted on her essential

femininity), and outside observers (who sought to “rationalize” his/her sexual identity according to accepted models of “deviant” behavior like sexual inversion and female ambition). The second essay by Anne Rubenstein examines the 1924 Mexico City controversy over “las pelonas” (women who bobbed their hair), a Jazz Age fad trend that provoked some men to violence on behalf of parochial tradition, other men to paternalism in the name of revolutionary modernity. The girls themselves, Rubenstein tells us, “were claiming two different identities . . . embodying the glamorous look of local society women and international celebrities, but at the same time . . . associating themselves with the revolution and its gendered educational projects” (71). An influential if unofficial proponent of the revolution’s education projects, film director Emilio “El Indio” Fernández, is the subject of the section’s final essay by Julia Tuñón. According to Tuñón, Fernández’s cinematic efforts to rehabilitate indigenous culture—*Janitzio*, *María Candelaria*, *Maclovía*, *La perla*—ended up emasculating Indian men (who are unable to defend their women) and silencing Indian women (who become enigmatic objects of desire and subjugation). As a result, she argues, “through El Indio’s cinema, the nation acquires a gendered character: essential Mexico is indigenous, ergo it is feminine and faces the tension implied by a modernity represented through criollos and mestizos . . . although in all his films the Indians are defeated and the women vanquished, the feminine principle, the indigenous principle, dominates and conquers, albeit solely in order to preserve injustice and inertia” (95).

Part Two, “Reshaping the Domestic Sphere,” examines the impact of revolutionary possibilities on traditional expectations for women as wives, students, teachers, mothers, and social workers (evaluating the performances of other women) in the post-revolutionary era. In her study of divorce in Yucatán, Stephanie Smith argues that while the liberalization of divorce laws by revolutionary governors Salvador Alvarado and Felipe Carillo Puerto garnered considerable attention in Mexico and elsewhere, in Yucatán itself it most often served to free men (rather than women) from

unwanted marriages, “to restore masculine honor damaged by wives whose behavior did not fall within boundaries considered proper as defined by the patriarchal conventions of society” (101), and to abet ongoing state efforts to supplant the Catholic Church as the arbiter of family values in Mexico. State initiatives to modernize women’s education proved just as fraught. Patience Schell’s examination of women’s vocational education in 1920s Mexico City exposes its often contradictory aims—to provide occupational training for paid work outside the home and to inculcate revolutionary family values that stressed self-sacrificing motherhood (and *not* birth control or sex education)—and its “potential to subvert domestic values and to promote women’s public activities” (124). Although revolutionary family values appear somewhat nebulous in the essays by Smith and Schell, Ann Blum’s study of public welfare policies on adoption under the Lázaro Cárdenas administration suggests that by the late 1930s those values had crystallized in the hands of a new generation of professional social workers who favored whiter, middle-class women who could afford to stay at home to raise their adopted child—despite official rhetoric aimed at promoting “proletarian mothers.”

Part Three, “The Gendered Realm of Labor Organizing,” provides case studies of women workers’ efforts to negotiate with their employers, male dominated unions, and the post-revolutionary Mexican state for better wages and working conditions. María Teresa Fernández-Aceves’s study of women organizing in the tortilla industry during the 1930s examines both their active participation in the union struggles to improve women’s wages and working conditions as well as the inevitable compromises that accompanied their subordinate role within “male-dominated, boss-rule unionism” (160). Heather Fowler-Salamini’s essay on women workers in the coffee industry reveals similar tensions at work on the factory floor and in working women’s social activities—tensions that helped produce “an alternative working-class women’s culture [that] . . . challenged provincial norms of trade unionism, patriarchy, and their own reputation as ‘street women’” (172-173). The experience of the working-

class men in Puebla's textile industry studied by Susan Gauss was rather different, as male union leaders deployed conventional gender roles that associated normative masculinity with factory work and union militancy and normative femininity with domesticity and maternalism.

Part Four, "Women and Revolutionary Politics," deals with women's political work in opposition to and in uneasy alliance with the post-revolutionary Mexican state. Opposition to the Mexican state is most obvious among the Catholic women studied by Kristina Boylan. According to Boylan, many Catholic women embarked with ill-disguised enthusiasm on careers as social activists, reconciling their public lives running everything from guns (in the Cristero revolt) to religious schools as an "unfortunate necessity, but one that fit in with the duty of wives and mothers to protect their loved ones" (202)—in this case from an impious revolutionary state hell-bent on socialist education and the secularization of public life. In contrast, Jocelyn Olcott's study of the women's activism in the Sole Front for Women's Rights (FUPDM) and the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) demonstrates the high costs in terms of autonomy, leverage, and radical politics of cooptation by the post-revolutionary state as FUPDM leaders "shifted their strategy from militant demonstrations and hunger strikes to establishing themselves as responsible, reasonable political actors working within the official channels" (233).

*Sex in Revolution's* two epilogues serve to situate the essays in *Sex in Revolution* in broader historical contexts. Lynn Stephen's analysis of rural women's activism in late twentieth century Mexico, the heyday of neoliberalism, suggests that the decline of government "support" for women's activism—a reversal of the post-revolutionary trend detailed in the essays—encouraged rural women's movements to take "a more active position, openly questioning the inequalities women suffered in relation to their ethnic and class positions as well as positively proposing the rights rural, indigenous women should enjoy within national law, their home communities, and the organizations that represent them" (258). Temma Kaplan's essay further broadens the historical context by drawing

comparisons to the Russian and Chinese revolutions which also “attempted to end social strife by reordering gender arrangements or by introducing new forms of patriarchy” (262). In the face of these different revolutionary efforts at social control, Kaplan notes that “practices of challenging the government, the unions, fathers, husbands, and male leaders periodically erupted in Mexico and in other countries when authorities least expected it” (276).

The essays in *Sex in Revolution* provide intriguing case studies of the complex intersections of “gender, politics, and power” in twentieth-century Mexico. As with most edited collections, the individual essays are a mixed bag of innovative and conventional ideas, convincing and muddled analysis, stylish and pedestrian prose. All of them are worth reading. And in this instance, effective organization and careful framing—which at first glance might seem excessive with two introductions and two epilogues—make this well-edited volume more coherent and more useful than is generally the case. Historians of modern Mexico and modern Latin America as well as scholars interested in the history of women and gender will find it an invaluable resource. *Sex in Revolution* is likely to be a staple in graduate seminars for years to come.