ENSAYOS BIBLIOGRÁFICOS / REVIEW ESSAYS

Recent Works on Labor and Gender

CHRIS WISNIEWSKI
University of California, San Diego

SUSIE S. PORTER: ***Working Women in Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions 1879-1931.*** Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2003.

ELIZABETH QUAY HUTCHISON: ***Labors Appropriate to Their Sex: Gender, Labor, and Politics in Urban Chile, 1900-1930.*** Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2001.

HEIDI TINSMAN: ***Partners in Conflict: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, Labor in Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950-1973.*** Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2002.

In recent years, labor studies have become increasingly sophisticated in terms of gendered analysis, and the three books under review here are no exception. Though collectively they cover different countries and time periods – and even concentrate on different social sectors – each of these monographs nevertheless focuses on some similar themes, especially patriarchy's influence on Latin American labor movements during the 20th century and about the crucial role that women themselves had in creating spaces within which they could – and did – expand their options. More than that, however, these works inform us about the highly gender-based nature of state- and industry-sponsored labor rhetoric and, in so doing, share new and important insights about the relationship between labor and state development in "modernizing" projects. As these scholars so

amply demonstrate, labor and workplace rhetoric, whether argued by factory or *hacienda* owner, state regulator or reformer, or the individual worker who toils day in day out, is never too far removed from the rhetoric which seeks to define – and more importantly, re-define – the household and the family.

Susie Porter's study focuses on Mexico City, whose labor force underwent dramatic changes during the reign of Porfirio Díaz, the ten-year revolution that overturned his dictatorship, and in the decade that followed during which order was finally restored. Most of Porter's seven central chapters cover this same approximate 50-year period in different thematic ways (some cover a slightly shorter period, some a longer one) and each remains well anchored to the task of understanding female workers in the capital. In 1879, the year her study begins, women held jobs in a limited number of female-dominated industries, primarily cigarette and clothing production and some handicrafts. Journalists, lawmakers, and factory owners characterized these jobs as instrumental in protecting female morality. With the dramatic expansion of Mexico's economy during the 1880s and 1890s, during which greater numbers of women gained employment in these and in other industries, the discourse about female workers changed. Porter traces this discourse through newspapers, pamphlets, advertisements, letters, petitions, and government reports. Elaborating on the work of Geoff Eley, Porter argues that this "language of morality, honor, and female nature gave 'reason' to and facilitated working women's entrance into the public sphere, both as a legitimating force and for the connections with the wider public it allowed them to make" (p. xix).

As was the case elsewhere in Latin America, the shift from organizing through homo-social labor organizations (mutual aid societies), during the 1880s and earlier, to doing so through unions during later periods, paralleled industrialization efforts. In Mexico, the Díaz administration supported only the former, but gradually union representation won favor with workers, especially as the revolution progressed and when the CROM and other labor confederations were founded. Importantly, however, argues Porter, it was women's early participation in mutual aid societies that prepared them for their very prominent role in revolutionary labor activities. This is one area where Porter's narrative shines. Indeed, between 1911 and 1914, large numbers of women took to the streets or occupied factories in protest against unsatisfactory working conditions, sometimes (but by no means always) with successful results. Although Porter's study covers the revolutionary era, it does not focus on the insurrection itself, but on the process of industrialization, which began before the revolution and outlasted it. She argues that the discourse of feminine morality and honor continued to inform public discussions about women workers (and women's work) well after the revolution's violent phase ended in 1920. She also claims that much of the

labor legislation that was passed in Mexico, including the 1931 Federal Labor Code, bears resemblance to other measures passed throughout the Americas at about that same time. Thus her study aspires to make connections with places beyond Mexico. The important thing to note about 1931 is that legislation was finally grounded in ideas about women's working *conditions*, though it did not altogether jettison notions of feminine weakness.

Porter convincingly demonstrates that where women worked had a great deal to do with how they organized and fought for their rights. Much of the book is spent examining wage earners, but her chapter on *vendedoras* is an exception. These women worked independently selling various goods from carts and stalls in the city's streets and markets. As such, they were never "threatened" by the moral and sexual dangers that factory workers faced, but neither did they have access to the same organizing resources that most factory and some storefront employees did. Nevertheless, in face of urban renewal efforts undertaken by the government between 1880 and 1910, these women showed exceptional resilience to the sometimes coercive methods that authorities employed against them as they tried to move vendors around, corral them into official market areas, put them out of business, or keep them from starting up in the first place. It is in her discussion of *vendedoras* that Porter offers a marvelously gender-based perspective of the ways in which urban reorganization aided the separation of social classes. Letters and petitions from this period clearly show that female vendors understood and took advantage of notions of ideal femininity. Not only did they invent traditions concerning their long-established right to remain in a certain locale, they also brought to bear their status as honorable, hard-working single mothers, and they called upon their disadvantaged position in metropolitan and national society with such phrases as "Madre Patria."

Female factory workers, on the other hand, also referenced notions of feminine "respectability," but they were more likely, especially as time went on, to assemble publicly and join representative labor groups. Interestingly, Porter shows that within different industries, female workers used different tactics. Cigarette rollers resorted to striking early, whereas clothing makers were more likely to appeal to elite women (most notably the President's wife) as mediators in their cause. Porter's discussion of elite women is, in one sense, a weakness of the work because, beyond the connection with Carmen Romero Rubio de Díaz, there is relatively little discussion of cooperation between elite and working-class women. If it was significant, it ought to hinge on more than a few exemplars, but one gets the sense from this work that "elite women" might be better designated as "first wives." Even so, Porter's study admirably adds to our understanding of public and private labor policy in metropolitan Mexico, which occurred be-

tween the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the rhetoric that engendered it, and the women workers who contributed to its development.

In a number of ways, Elizabeth Quay Hutchison's study of working-class women in Chile during the first three decades of the 20th century reveals findings similar to Porter's. In Chile, as was the case in Mexico, women's employment reached a high water mark in the middle of the century's first decade, and then declined steadily through the next two. Both works show that at least part of that decline was due to the shifting nature of reporting criteria, not necessarily women leaving the workforce – though that happened as well. Women who worked at home or in the "informal" employment sector, for example, were likely to be ignored in census counts.

Hutchison separates her study into examining what she terms "Working Class Life and Politics" and "Women Workers and the Social Question," and she divides her book into two parts accordingly. In the first section, we learn of female migration (which exceeded that of men) to Santiago, which facilitated the increased presence of women in formal, informal, and illegal work sectors within the metropolitan arena. As a result, class conflict increased as did the discourse about women workers, to which labor leaders contributed. "The discourse on women workers that emerged in the first decade of the 20th century – made necessary in large part by the instant focus on the social question at all levels of the public debate," argues Hutchison, "required that labor leaders acknowledge women's presence in the workplace and propose forms of female organization, if only to bring the erosion of male industrial wages through female employment to an end" (p. 18).

The "social question," of course, covered public worries over health, vice, crime, and politics, as well as working conditions and labor unrest, but, says Hutichison, "the emergence of the social question in national discourse owed less to actual changes in the socioeconomic status of the working poor than to their demonstrated organizational potential. Although striking male workers were the principal targets of private and state repressive actions under the Parliamentary Republic, Santiago's working women were consistently subjected to another sort of class discipline, one that solicited women's cooperation in the workplace as well as the home" (p. 141). This involved training women not just to be good workers in factories, but equally good homemakers, which reinforced normative gender roles. Hutchison offers a thoroughly nuanced and well-researched view of these state-sponsored schools and their curriculum, and she shows that though they were initially equipped to teach women industrial skills, the subject matter shifted to domestic and home-bound talents thanks to politicians and educators who hoped to protect feminine respectability.

Equally engaging is Hutchison's discussion of elite Catholic women who worked to recondition female labor as a respectable activity. Hutchison argues that class fears and economic reality persuaded these reformers to take part in this campaign. Financial necessity drove young women from "good" families into the workplace; moreover, the presence of so many such women outside their respective homes provoked others into the debate as well. These reasons aside, the desire to counter the growing popularity of socialism and certain strains of feminism also motivated some Catholic women in their efforts.

But it was not just Catholic reformers who had female laborers on their minds. Hutchison spends several chapters in the first part of her book exploring the incorporation of women's organizations into organized labor history as a whole, which necessarily involved men. Her evidence demonstrates just how much the Chilean labor movement relied on "gendered paradigms" to both explain the phenomenon of women in the workforce and to elicit male workers in the cause of decrying capitalism's failures. The development of worker feminism, which was directly linked to unionization efforts, is covered through an insightful analysis of newspaper accounts, which were published between 1905 and 1908 in a short-lived but nevertheless potent period of labor discourse. Working-class men were blamed as much for female exploitation as were factory owners, and women were incited to undertake their own liberation. Most ironically, worker feminists rarely, if ever, challenged the dominant understandings of domestic relations; and they looked forward, once the class struggle had succeeded, to women returning to their "natural" obligations in the home. Thus, one of the book's most satisfying qualities is the way in which all of several competing (and conflictive) ideologies, tactics, players, and rhetorical strategies intersected to form what was then the beginnings of the Chilean labor movement.

Hutchison's last chapter, which examines the interplay of competing legislative ideologies employed by interventionists and non-interventionists, points out the numerous loopholes that existed within Chilean labor law, and the ways in which many factory owners systematically ignored workplace regulations. To intercede, the state marshaled inspectors, some of whom were women. Hutchison's investigation revealed that a number of these female labor inspectors became significant players in early feminist politics in Chile.

Chile's labor movement was not limited to Santiago and Valparaíso, of course; it also became active in the country's agricultural areas, but not until much later. Heidi Tinsman's book is an outstanding account of gender and sexuality as applied to the Chilean Agrarian Reform effort, which was among the most far-reaching anywhere, at least in terms of acreage redistribution. It was also the most paradoxical, serving both capitalistic and revolutionary goals. Agrarian reform began in 1964 under Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei's administration,

which reallocated more than 20% of Chile's agricultural land in an effort to uplift peasant families, counter radical politics, and mobilize workers in what the President termed a "Revolution in Liberty." Up until that time, large farms within the Aconcagua Valley (the region that Tinsman concentrates on) relied primarily upon the system of *inquilinaje* or *latifundia,* in which landowners ceded land to *inquilinos* (male heads of family) in return for their and their family's labor.

Men saw the patriarchy that underlay the system as entirely "natural," argues Tinsman, and it fit easily into the Catholic Church's model of civic domestic arrangements. The government's effort to eliminate this system of semi-peonage was equally driven by patriarchal ideology. Officials in both the Christian Democratic and later Popular Unity governments shared a belief that agrarian reform should primarily empower rural men through collective farming, and to that end unions were encouraged and hugely successful in the effort. Unionization in the countryside quickened property takeovers and the coalitions that were built between leftist and Catholic labor organizations and the newer state-sponsored unions succeeded in improving working conditions and wages. The all-male environment fostered by this effort succeeded in getting *inquilinos* to stand up to their bosses and become "real men"; but it failed in some ways, too: women were largely excluded from organized labor and men's sexual liberties were reaffirmed.

However, women were never considered unimportant in the reform effort. Their task was to support their husbands and efficiently manage healthy households. To that end, *campesino* women were the recipients of educational efforts, mothers' centers, and family planning programs through which they acquired skills "appropriate to their sex," socialized with one another, and participated in community activities, including labor activism. Younger women and men participated in *clubs juveniles* that promoted political, vocational, and cultural development which stressed their future responsibilities as adult citizens. Though female agency was promoted through "gender mutualism" (cooperation between the sexes), the system was predicated upon distinct gender roles, it reinforced women's domestic responsibilities, and it regarded the husband as the ultimate authority in family planning matters. Nevertheless, argues Tinsman, rural Chilean women did benefit – and participate – in the state's Agrarian Reform effort, even though they exhibited hostility to the more radical politics advocated by Salvador Allende's government.

Without doubt, agrarian reform under Allende promoted greater gender equality, redistributed more land, and encouraged greater activism among those in the countryside, but it did not have the result of incorporating rural women into the formal economy. This was due mainly to the overwhelming opposition of rural men and women's continued commitment to the domestic sphere. Moreover,

the program's more intensified nature and the perceptible socialist rhetoric that went along with it alienated many of its supporters, including rural women. Tinsman offers compelling evidence that refutes conventional explanations of rural feminine hostility to the UP such as these women's religious or otherwise conservative values or the fact that the program did not take them into account. Indeed, at least within Aconcagua, women received considerable material benefits and supported the program. However, as men became more politically involved, they traveled more, sometimes developing relationships with other women or engaging in extramarital sex, and, Tinsman argues, leaving their wives feeling abandoned, thus causing women's to lose faith in the Reform.

Tinsman's epilogue ironically points out that it was General Pinochet's regime, following the 1973 coup which overthrew Allende, which created conditions for gender solidarity among rural workers – a goal never realized under Agrarian Reform – by forcing rural women into the agricultural labor market. Tinsman's study is a truly excellent monograph that is not only well informed and wonderfully written, but an exceptional and candid example of the way in which gender inequality and sexuality affect revolutionary movements. Her use of oral testimony deserves particular praise, for her interviewees are surprisingly frank and their testimony very revealing, especially regarding the different ways that men and women experienced and understood the legacy of the Agrarian Reform project. Like Porter's and Hutchison's studies, Tinsman's also reminds us that patriarchy, while a stalwart presence in the family, community and workplace, never enjoyed an entirely stable existence, at least not in 20th century Mexico and Chile. More to the point, these works make it clear that our understanding of labor history is considerably enhanced when we investigate its gender-based nature.