

# H-Net Reviews

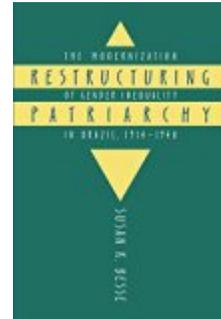
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Susan K. Besse. *Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil, 1914-1940*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xv + 285 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4559-2; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2252-4.

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By almost any standard, Susan K. Besse's book is a success. It combines intelligent analysis, thorough archival research, and an eminently readable style in a concise 200 pages. Latin Americanists will find this a welcome addition to the scarce literature on twentieth-century Brazilian social history.

Besse tells a compelling story of the erosion of traditional forms of patriarchal power in the twentieth century and how Brazilian authorities managed to update gender roles without disturbing the fundamental inequity at the root of patriarchy. In the first chapter, Besse makes her argument for the "demise of patriarchy," demonstrating that there was a crisis of control over women. This crisis has been documented by other scholars as well, including Martha Abreu and Sueann Caulfield, who are in agreement with Besse that Brazilians were alarmed by changing social patterns. In Chapters Two and Three, she shows how the decline of dowries and reduced parental control over the choice of marriage partners, greater public visibility for respectable women, and calls for more female education and suffrage alarmed Brazilian men in the early part of this century. The institution of marriage seemed to be at the center of this concern and critics cried out that marriage and the family were under siege from disgruntled women who were avoiding, delaying, or abandoning marriages. Their efforts to "shore up" the institution ranged from dances and social clubs designed to help women find suitable partners to legal measures targeting unfaithful, violent, or absent husbands. Experts began to redefine the ideal of marriage expressed in normative literature to incorporate newer notions of hygienic, companionate marriages. Besse draws out the conflicting messages embedded in these modernized models of mar-

riage. Most of the proposed changes lacked substance, instead they primarily altered appearances and recasted marriage just enough to make it acceptable to critics. Not surprisingly, the proposed reforms identified wives as the root of most problems and targeted them for improvements and repairs.

In succeeding chapters, the author demonstrates a similar process for updating child rearing, women's education, and "women's work." For the sake of children and in the interest of the family and the nation, women had to be trained in the new scientific methods of motherhood. In this section, Besse illustrates that this process was not a campaign forced upon unwilling women. One of the strengths of this work is the subtlety and sensitivity the author employs to show how women accepted or contributed to their own oppression, trapped by both positive and negative norms. Besse explains that "Motherhood forcefully and narrowly prescribed the boundaries of female character traits and appropriate social action in the minds of women themselves as well as for the society at large." (p. 109) Chapter Five, entitled "Educating Without Emancipating" captures the essence of the modernization of gender in Brazil. Everyone clamored about the problem of uneducated women, yet uncontrolled and unlimited education of women might have unleashed revolutionary forces. Instead, Brazilians managed to confine those opportunities to women of elite backgrounds. Besse explains, "the education most women received was tailored to keep their aspirations in check ... by directing [them] toward a narrow range of vocational courses at the secondary level." "The goal of the educational system was not to foster female intellectual, economic, or social emancipation but to effectively mobilize women to promote physical health, national economic prosperity, and

social and political stability” (p. 128).

Turning to paid employment in her next chapter, Besse extends her argument to show that women were drawn increasingly into the workplace, but most often in low-status and low-paying jobs. Despite the rhetoric, “In practice, the inclusion of middle- and upper-class women in the labor force probably benefited Brazil’s economy more than it benefited women themselves” (p. 162). As she does throughout the book, Besse includes the views and words of individual women, not just the rhetoric of government officials or authors of normative literature. As with their attitudes towards marriage and motherhood, one can see the ambiguity that women felt towards this modernization of their social roles. One woman, “Brites,” explained with obvious pride in her career that she had always loved to teach. “While I was a teacher, I lived.” On the other hand she resented the low pay and low social status she had received, but especially resented society’s scorn for the single, working woman. She explained, “The single woman has no social prominence ... I was ‘NN’ [nothing and nobody] in life: the actor in the play who serves coffee, passes the tray, closes the door. The actor who says nothing; who enters silent and leaves mute.” (p. 159) *Restructuring of Patriarchy* concludes with an extensive chapter on the varieties of feminist and anti-feminist movements. In this chapter, Besse chronicles the rise of the Brazilian Federation for Feminine Progress which was the most prominent of the formal feminist organizations. The chapter comes alive with the individual stories of feminists like Bertha Lutz, one of the leaders of the organization since its founding in 1922. Though the FBPF demanded and won female

suffrage and campaigned for better educational opportunities and higher wages, Besse skillfully shows how it remained an essentially conservative organization. It accepted male dominance and the primacy of marriage and the family for women. Besse poignantly illustrates the continued strength of patriarchy with the tragic stories of women who truly did challenge the basic gender inequality of Brazilian society. The outspoken critiques and unorthodox personal lives of Maria Lacerda de Moura and “Pagu” failed to win significant support and both women ended their lives bitter and alienated by a society which could not accommodate the challenges they represented.

Overall, Besse’s work is a thoughtful examination of gender relations in modern Brazil which will be useful to specialists and general readers alike. It is unfortunate that the Estado Novo and “the construction of state hegemony” do not play as big a role in the analysis as the cover blurb suggests. Though Besse sketches the outlines of the connection between gender and the state, her focus is on normative authors and women themselves. Government officials and politicians are not central actors in Besse’s study, though what is suggested about them only stimulates further interest. Although it is not fair to criticize an author for not doing a different project, I would like to see the project brought up to the present and so to complete the compelling story Besse has told in *Restructuring Patriarchy*.

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