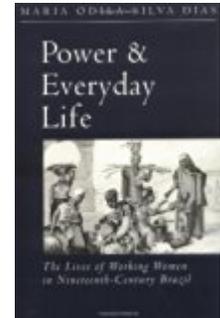


Maria Odila Leite da Silva Dias. *Power and Everyday Life: The Lives of Working Women in Nineteenth-Century Brazil.* New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-2205-0.



Reviewed by Susan Kellogg

Published on H-LatAm (November, 1995)

Brazilianists, Latin Americanists, and women's historians have much to learn from this brief but rich study of the everyday lives of working women in nineteenth-century Sao Paulo, Brazil. Gracefully written, *Power and Everyday Life* rigorously and consistently dissects the class and racial faultlines among Sao Paulo's women from the mid-eighteenth century to the late nineteenth. Yet the study also shows that gender, in this case female identity, is a crucial variable for describing and explaining the social roles and experiences of Brazil's urban women of color. Dias examines how gender shaped work, family life, the ownership and transmission of property, and even the myths and tales of popular culture which so insightfully commented on women's lives--the joys and sorrows men and women felt toward one another, the ambivalent divide between patriarchal stereotypes, and the realities of working- and lower-class women's lives.

Chapter One, "Daily Life and Power," describes the scattered, diverse sources that can be used to describe Sao Paulo's women of color. It emphasizes how important food, its availability or

lack thereof, was in shaping these women's lives. The chapter also introduces a theme important to the book: the large number of families headed by single women (an observation previously made by Elizabeth Kuznesof [1980]). While many female heads of household were white, over the course of the nineteenth century, there was an increase in the number of mixed-race women who headed households. Women's role as household head meant that their work was crucial for themselves and their families. Dias also shows that working women often performed tasks more associated with men, for example, the trading of livestock. Likewise, she finds evidence of women working as day laborers on public buildings and road repairs (pp. 31-32).

The author also begins discussion of another important theme in this chapter: how urbanization provoked constant confrontation between working women who commonly used public space and city authorities who wished to restrict these uses. This theme is continued in Chapter Two, "Bakerswomen and Women Stallholders: Survival and Resistance," which looks in greater

detail at women's work, especially at those women who were bakers (usually poor whites) or itinerant street vendors (usually black). As both the colonial state and urban officials sought in the late eighteenth century to increase their control and tax collections, white and black women workers persisted in the informal, petty economy but grew increasingly impoverished.

Chapter Three, "The Myth of the Absent Lady," presents another important topic: how stereotypes about honorable white Portuguese women, especially their absence, were an important part of the construction of racial stereotypes and hierarchy underlying "... the social values of domination in colonial society" (p. 53). The chapter also uses material items, especially clothing, to tell the story of the class and race hierarchy which so dramatically differentiated among women. Yet the reality of Sao Paulo and Brazil was complicated, the book shows, because in reality there were large numbers of impoverished white women though they were fewer in number in the mining areas and new territories. In these latter regions, Portuguese women actively sought to control marriages and property in order to reinforce racial boundaries.

But in urban areas the number of poor white women kept increasing and they represented a social and cultural anomaly. They lived as single mothers, as mistresses or as illegitimate daughters, and some also held slaves. Chapter Four, "Ladies and Women Slaves at a Price," examines the female master-female slave relationship. Many of these slaves were wage earners and their owners were living off of these earnings. This chapter illustrates the complexities of urban slavery and the master-slave relationship in this context because the boundary between slave and free was ambiguous. As the Brazilian manufacture of cloth decline and poorer women owners lost their tenuous place in the manufacturing and informal sectors of the urban economy, tensions between

women owners and slaves increased, and the number of slaves declined.

Chapter Five, "Slave and Freedwomen Vendors," analyzes the place of female slaves in the informal urban economy in greater detail. Slaves sold the commodities of everyday life among themselves perhaps reenacting West African female economic tasks to some degree. Dias shows that rural women sold Indian foods in urban streets also, illustrating the ethnic and racial complexities of urban life. As authorities cracked down on these street activities, slaves and freed women responded by trying to protect their economic position through legal and illegal means.

"The Local Community," the sixth chapter, examines matrilocal family organization. Dias describes the age, sex, racial, and authority structures within female-headed households and shows how important collective labor was for their survival. Most female household headers were white but the presence of servants insured racial diversity within households which led to racial and ethnic tensions. Gender-based tensions existed as well. The mother-daughter link in female-headed households was so strong, Dias suggests, that sons were often abandoned or given to others to be reared. She paints a grim picture of childhood in nineteenth-century Sao Paulo with working and underclass children either on their own at young ages or engaged in insecure jobs and unable to benefit from their meager earnings. Tales and folklore often expressed the loneliness and hardships suffered by young girls.

Chapter Seven, "The Magic of Survival," examines the economic costs of survival for poorer households, especially those headed by women. Looking at both incomes and the cost of living through property inventories, the author shows that itinerant trade connected women's work with their families' consumption of low-cost goods. British textiles and state and municipal reform and taxation efforts led to the physical displacement of poor women of color, African, mulatto,

and Indian, who were left by the end of the nineteenth century to find new economic and spatial niches in an urbanizing, modernizing economy that had ever fewer places for them.

While the book suffers from a somewhat circular and redundant organization, much of the writing vividly evokes the experiences of a broad range of Sao Paulos's nineteenth-century women. Dias's findings about family structure and the ways that race shaped women's work are important and the book offers a clear contrast to Sandra Lauderdale Graham's *House and Street*. Dias's analysis questions Graham's picture of a rigid cultural and ideological divide between house and street. The portrayal of women's work provided by Dias is also a more complex, variegated one but the two books can profitably be read together because Graham draws attention to aspects of nineteenth-century urbanization, such as public health, that Dias does not consider.

The great strength of this book lies in its dynamic picture of ethnically and racially diverse women who interacted with each other in households, streets, small businesses, and markets. However, the shadowy presence of Indian women in Sao Paulo calls out for more description and analysis. The reader ends the book inferring that the formal abolition of slavery was less critical for nineteenth-century working and lower-class women than the modernizing tendencies of the Brazilian economy which sharpened class differences and impoverished many women in new, more severe ways. Brazilianists, Latin Americanists, and women's historians can profit from this book's rigorous, dynamic treatment of gender, race and class; this book deserves a wide audience!

CITATIONS

Graham, Sandra Lauderdale 1988 *House and Street: The Domestic World of Servants and Masters in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kuznesof, Elizabeth 1980 "The Role of the Female-Headed Household in Brazilian Modernization: Sao Paulo 1765-1836," *Journal of Social History*, 13(4):588-613.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Susan Kellogg. Review of Dias, Maria Odila Leite da Silva. *Power and Everyday Life: The Lives of Working Women in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. November, 1995.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=216>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.