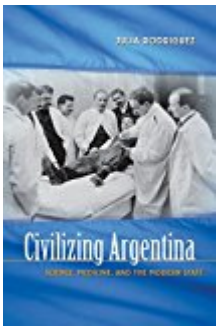
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Julia Rodríguez. *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 352 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-5669-7.

Reviewed by Vera Reber

Published on H-LatAm (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Kenneth Kincaid (Purdue University North Central)

Julia Rodríguez has two major foci in her recent monograph *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State.* First, she provides an intellectual history from 1880-1940 of how the Argentine state associated science and medicine with providing order. Second, she argues that the “golden era,” 1880-1914, rather than a period of prosperity, was instead an era dependent on foreign economies and internal corruption. She asserts that Argentine intellectuals, government professionals, and medical personnel sought to utilize the language of science to develop the modern state in their image. At the same time that the Argentine elite used scientific language and methods, they evaluated immigrants' and the lower class's contributions to Argentina in terms of traditional values of work and family. The elite sought to use science and medicine to cure the nation’s ills. However, the “antihumanist and patronizing form of social progress devised to contain and control inferior groups were the real seeds of national decay" (p. 255). It was the end of a “civilized” Argentina, not the beginning. The author successfully increases our understanding of how Argentine bureaucrats, scientists, public health specialists, and medical professionals adopted European concepts of health and medicine. Her arguments are less convincing in explaining the rise to power of Juan Perón and the military dictatorship and Dirty War.

Civilizing Argentina is organized by the categories in which a physician might evaluate a patient: "Symptoms," "Diagnosis," "Prescriptions," and "Hygiene." Under “Symptoms” the author sees a clash between barbarism and civilization. For the generation of 1880, civilization’s conquest of barbarism served as the organizing principle for the creation of the modern nation of Argentina. Under “Diagnosis,” Rodríguez recounts how Argentine intellectuals used European scientific models to evaluate individuals who committed homicides and robberies and those with mental illnesses. The elite associated immigrants and particularly the lower class with deviance. Social pathologists identified those whom they believed undermined the morality of Argentine society.

Both scientists and government leaders saw class conflict and the cultural clash of immigrants as undermining national interest.

The "prescription" necessary to save and civilize the nation targeted three groups: women, men who threatened the public order, and criminals. To assure the rise of a modern nation, women were to focus their energies on the home and on being good mothers as defined by elite values. Men needed to work to support the family and refrain from strikes and public protests. Criminals, violent individuals, vagrants, the mentally ill, orphans, and nonconforming wives and prostitutes were to be separated from society by imprisonment in institutions. Legislators used medical concepts to discuss anarchism and other political and social disorders. Immigrants were viewed as necessary laborers but undesirable citizens.

"Hygiene" became the program for civilizing the population and modernizing the nation. State public hygienists and physicians sought to impose their values and standards on immigrants and working men and women in both the public sphere and private homes. The programs in state hospitals, orphanages, and prisons were most easily subjected to the state policies. In spite of these efforts, the government failed to reshape the women's experiences in the private sphere or men's actions in the public sphere. While immigrant women viewed family and children as central to their lives, economic circumstances forced them to find paying work. Further, working-class women were neither able for economic reasons nor willing for cultural reasons to accept the child-rearing practices preferred by the state.. General strikes and mass demonstrations beginning in the 1890s became a characteristic feature of Argentine life in the twentieth century.

With the rise of social history, intellectual history has gone out of vogue. Too often contemporary historians have little interest in the history of ideas. But the new intellectual history recognizes that ideas cannot be separated from the individuals and cultures that shaped them. To understand society one needs to evaluate the ideas which influenced state policies. With the scientific revolution and Enlightenment, science shaped Western states. Argentina is part of that tradition. At the end of the nineteenth century the government utilized specialists in hygiene, psychiatry, criminology, and medicine to shape and manage the programs that modernized Argentina. Most notable of these were psychiatrist and criminologist José Ingenieros, scientist José María Ramos Mejía, and physician and hygienist Emilio Coni. Julia Rodríguez's monograph thus explores how European "scientific" ideas of human actions were applied to Argentina. ***Civilizing Argentina*** is indeed at its best when the author explores the interactions between ideas, individuals, and government policy.

Rodríguez, however, is not satisfied with writing intellectual history. She is seeking to explain the paradox of Argentina. Why has a country with such economic potential and which has enjoyed periods of democratic administration failed to reach its full potential? She responds by arguing that "[t]he rudiments of later reactionary state violence were rationalized, strengthened and mobilized during Argentina's rare period of liberal democracy" (p. 257). While she has contributed to the discussion of the issue, she has not satisfactorily answered the question. References to the failed democracy are primarily discussed in the introduction and conclusion. To prove her case Rodríguez needs to discuss economic institutions and structures. Further, the author also must include a detailed explanation of the failures of state policies. Since the medicine and science which the Argentine elite applied to control immigrants and the working class were also utilized in other Western nations, the author should attempt to explain how Argentina was different. Comparisons with how other nations implemented policies to control nonconformists would be useful, but that would also require a second book. However, a more detailed examination of how work-

ing-class men and women responded to state efforts to shape their values might have better explained the failures and would have fit easily within this monograph.

Civilizing Argentina is an important book. Julia Rodríguez has provided us with an intellectual history of science and medicine as applied to Argentina. She has explained how the various representatives of the state employed European medical and scientific concepts. She also has contributed to the literature that has sought to explain the failures of the Argentine state. The story of efforts to create a modern Argentine nation is more than a history of its economic, political, and social institutions. Medical and scientific programs utilized by the state need to be considered in any explanation of elite efforts to civilize Argentina. Such a history also involves a closer reading of the ideas and philosophies of the governing elite.

preferred

The state utilized the skills and the ideas of the

the

the

the

to modernize the state.

Julia

answers the question

that

utilized

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25187