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Ann Shelby Blum. *Domestic Economies: Family, Work, and Welfare in Mexico City, 1884-1943.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. xliii + 351 pp. $30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8032-1359-3.

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Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan (University of Western Ontario)

Ann S. Blum's book explores how perceptions about childhood changed, and how those transformations impacted family life in a key period of Mexican history. The author explores continuities and ruptures between the liberal dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910), known as the Porfiriato, and the postrevolutionary period (1920-43). Child abandonment and child labor are central to Blum's argument, which exposes the importance of class and gender in defining the experience of childhood. The first part analyses the Porfiriato and the second section looks at the revolutionary and postrevolutionary period, a moment in which elite discourse was discredited and mass mobilization put workers' needs at the center of debate.

Chapter 1 addresses child labor in the Porfiriato, a period in which peasants and poor rural dwellers migrated to Mexico City, attracted by the industrial growth. Many workers, however, did not succeed in finding factory jobs, which was frequently the case for unskilled women who ended up working as live-in domestic servants. Most employers did not allow domestic servants to bring their children, fearing that servants would focus on their offspring rather than on their work duties. Children of female workers who did not have extended family ended up living at orphanages. Parents had to contribute monthly to keep their parental rights; otherwise children were put up for adoption. Adopted minors were expected to work, and usually became domestic servants. These practices reveal that for the elite "the working poor, especially single mothers, were less entitled to family life" (p. 39). Childhood as a period of protection and economic dependency was a prerogative of the middle and upper class, who were a minority in the nation.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that adoption in the Porfiriato reproduced social class as most of the minors given into adoption were girls who were openly expected to work as domestic servants in exchange for sustenance. Thus public welfare reproduced family fragmentation, child circulation, and poverty. Laws benefited adopters who sought children for labor while constraining minors' op-

portunities for social mobility. Moreover, the work of domestic servants allowed middle- and upper-class women to devote themselves to childrearing; their children enjoyed a protected childhood while the offspring of the poor carried out unpaid domestic labor.

Chapter 3 narrates the fascinating history of wet nursing in Mexico. In 1898 wet nurses were brought into orphanages, inspections were required, and bottle-feeding was introduced. Before that, orphan babies were sent to live with wet nurses and their families, thus women who fed children earned an income while staying at home and looking after their own children. When hygiene and sanitation standards were raised, wet nurses were forced to leave their families behind and move to orphanages, thus, as in the case of domestic servants, they were expected to abandon their children. Women's paid labor, as shown by Susie Porter, was considered a corrupting influence.[1] Mothers and workers were "two mutually exclusive categories in the eyes of welfare officials and their class peers" (p. 95).

Chapter 4 argues that despite changes in legal definitions of childhood, state discourse and policy reproduced gender and class perceptions. Middle-class reformers thought that the working class was unfit as both workers and parents, thus state intervention was required. Education and welfare became cornerstones of nation-state formation in posrevolutionary Mexico. The aim of state programs was to help the working class to overcome poverty by imitating the manners and morals of the middle class, however, in doing so class structures were reproduced by implying that the middle class was the model to follow. Nevertheless, a middle-class lifestyle was beyond the means of the majority of the population. The state also increased its influence over family life by promoting civil marriage and passing a divorce law to reduce "the illegitimate unions among the popular classes" (p. 110). According to reformers, working-class fathers were absent or unknown. In consequence, the state had to play the role of the paterfamilias while women and children were dependants.

Chapter 5 shows that postrevolutionary reformers and hygienists reproduced the class and race understandings of their Porfirian predecessors, as both considered that the working class was in need of guidance and that women's traditional knowledge about child care was just a sign of their ignorance. Poverty and ignorance were viewed as the main causes of infant mortality, which was a threat to the nation. To overcome this problem the posrevolutionary state restructured welfare institutions, created new campaigns such as the visiting nurses program, and disseminated information through the press. Welfare programs were intended to improve the future economic standing of the working class, on the assumption that healthy and productive workers would earn higher salaries. Welfare programs treated clients as minors; however, both women and the working class used "the political leverage of the child health program" to advance their agendas (p. 180). The importance of children as the future of the nation, for instance, empowered women as motherhood became a vehicle of social and political inclusion (p. 128). Hence, women fighting for suffrage appealed to their role as mothers.[2]

Chapter 6 reveals that in the postrevolutionary period, juvenile courts used orphanages to perpetuate child circulation and labor. Child labor continued to be a constant among the urban poor. Working parents, particularly those who were live-in domestic servants, preferred to place their children as domestic servants or at unpaid apprenticeships. Through an analysis of criminal records, Blum provides evidence of the discrepancies in reformers' and legislators' discourses as some argued that work was the cause of family separation while others thought that work was a solution for keeping families together. On the one hand, working parents could not look after their

offspring while poverty forced children to work and therefore interact with adults, who were perceived as a corrupting force. On the other hand, work represented a commitment to the family while labor instilled discipline in children and prepared them for adulthood. According to Blum, this discussion reveals changes in the perception of family and work and proves the difficulties of implementing the law and transforming daily practices.

In the last chapter the author analyzes the growing importance of motherhood as a way to interact in adult public arenas. Adoption petitions emphasized that through motherhood women were participating in Mexican society. Adoption grants reveal that reformers saw adoption as a way to guarantee a middle-class status for minors, keeping them out of work. Thus, adoptees were entrusted to middle-class families, single or widowed women with enough economic means, and traditional working-class families in which women were homemakers and men breadwinners. If a single or widowed woman without enough money or a family where both husband and wife worked petitioned to adopt, they were usually rejected. Blum provides evidence of the middle-class biases of social workers who judged applicants based on their demeanor, moral character, and living conditions, thus restricting the right to adopt and have a family to the middle and upper classes. Halting the adoption of minors to employ them as domestic servants did not end with new adoption laws; child labor persisted through informal child circulation.

To conclude the author points to the continuities and changes between the Porfiriato and the postrevolutionary period. Prior to the revolution working women did not have the right to be mothers, while in the 1930s working-class women from specific sectors, those considered to be important for national development, were granted social security. Nevertheless, domestic servants, among many other workers in the informal sector, were excluded from social security. During the Porfiriato, seven-year-old children could work legally while after the revolution the legal age for work was raised to twelve. In the 1940s a second wave of industrialization mechanized production, decreasing the number of employees. At this time, state officials considered that working children were taking job opportunities away from adults. Moreover, poor families who put their children to work were “unmodern, immoral, and illegal” (p. 256). Therefore, well into the 1940s reformers continued to assume that women and children had to be at home, failing to recognize working-class families and portraying them as inferior.

Blum’s work is a major contribution to the nascent field of childhood history in Latin America. She draws from the historiography of gender and welfare to reflect how class, race, and gender interplayed in defining family relations and nation-state formation in modern Mexico. The author draws from a vast array of sources, from official records to professional journals of the period as well as print media and photographs. Images help to illustrate her argument, while her engaging writing makes the reading enjoyable. This book will find an audience among Latin American, gender, and childhood historians, and will also be useful as a classroom reading for upper-level courses on the history of welfare, childhood, and gender.

Notes

[1]. Susie S. Porter, *Working Women in Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879-1931* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003).

[2]. Anna Macias, *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940* (Westport: Greenwood, 1982).

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