

Pablo Piccato. *The Tyranny of Opinion: Honor in the Construction of the Mexican Public Sphere.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. xii + 388 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4645-6.



Reviewed by Robert Jackson

Published on H-LatAm (August, 2010)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo (Virginia Tech)

The concept of “honor” analyzed in this book relates to shifts in the history of the press in Mexico in the last third of the nineteenth century, and the method by which Porfirio Diaz muzzled the press. Honor during this period also manifested itself in duels that attempted to redress insults or attacks on the honor and public reputation of individuals. Pablo Piccato’s goal is to understand shifts in the legal definition of honor as applied to the press, but also at the same time to comprehend government officials’ selective application of the 1871 law prohibiting duels.

Press censorship during the colonial and early republican periods gave way to a freer press following the liberal triumph in 1857, and the defeat of conservatives in 1861. However, a legal system of press juries existed to adjudicate conflicts arising from articles published in the press. Under the legal procedure, complaints against articles that appeared in the press or pamphlets and broadsides were heard by special juries. Although the jury was ostensibly constituted to mediate disputes, violators (newspaper publishers and re-

porters) generally did not face stiff punishments and often got off without paying any consequences.

Piccato capably describes the press culture during the Restored Republic and early Porfiriato, as well as the careers of “combat journalists” who did not earn much money but made connections with politicians and elites. The press was contentious and conflicts over honor occurred. The author focuses on the 1880 duel between Ireneo Paz and Santiago Sierra, the brother of Justo Sierra, to get a sense of how honor operated in the public sphere and in public opinion, and how “combat journalists” defended their honor with their lives if necessary. Paz and Sierra worked for competing newspapers with their offices across the street from each other. A dispute over the authorship of an article could not be mediated, and ended in the duel in which Paz killed Sierra. Despite being outlawed in the 1871 penal code, government officials looked the other way, and Paz did not face legal consequences. It was seen as a private matter of honor. The death of his brother

affected Justo Sierra, resulting in his retirement from the press business.

The second episode Piccato examines is the public reaction to an 1884 plan to renegotiate Mexico's public debt with English bondholders. President Manuel González (1880-84) attempted to solve a government financial crisis by renegotiating the terms of debt bonds. What González had hoped would have been a pro forma ratification by Congress exploded into relatively large-scale protests spearheaded by students and passionate speeches in Congress by orators, such as the poet Dalvador Díaz Mirón and Guillermo Prieto. Speeches by regime supporters, including Justo Sierra, failed to sway public opinion. González withdrew the proposal, but in the following year Porfirio Díaz decreed the implementation of the plan and repressed the opposition. In discussing the episode, Piccato examines the role of oratory in framing public opinion, and the profile of students and their influence on public opinion.

In the 1880s and 1890s, following the abolition of press juries in 1882, Díaz effectively muzzled the press, and many newspapers that had been the venue of "combat journalists" disappeared and were replaced by *El Imparcial*, which enjoyed Díaz's favor and financial subsidies. A legal change gave the regime a new effective weapon to silence the opposition. Honor was defined as a public good, and the notion of honor and reputation inherited from the colonial period was replaced by a modern concept of libel and defamation. Moreover, with the abolition of press juries, judges now heard cases of attacks on honor by the press, and devised a new legal concept that gave judges an out to impose arbitrary and capricious rulings. This was the idea of the "psychological state" of the judge's mind when he heard a case and rendered a decision. This legal precedent was first used in the 1885 case of protest against Díaz's decree implementing the English debt bond plan that had failed the previous year in the face of public opinion. The author further explores the

new legal definition of honor in an analysis of defamation cases.

The new legal definition, however, did not automatically eliminate established mental patterns. Piccato ends the book with an analysis of the 1894 Romero-Verástegui duel, and dueling in general in Mexico. A slight to personal honor led to the duel, and the death of José Verástegui. In this case Colonel Francisco Romero spent time in jail, signaling a shift in legal attitudes toward dueling, which, despite the 1871 law, continued in Mexico. In most cases prior to the Romero-Verástegui duel, government officials looked the other way, and many Mexicans justified dueling because it was an accepted practice in more advanced countries, such as France. Supporters of dueling, however, had to sidestep the fact that dueling did not occur in Great Britain, the other country Mexicans esteemed as the model of modernity and progress.

Piccato has written an effective and masterful analysis of public opinion, the press, and the mechanism Díaz used to muzzle the press. This book is best suited for a professional audience and particularly legal scholars and social historians of nineteenth-century Mexico. There are several points, however, that I would like to raise about the author's analysis. Firstly, Piccato cites Ramón Gutiérrez's controversial study of colonial New Mexico (*When Jesus Came the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* [1991]) as a source for understanding honor during the colonial period. Gutiérrez's book examines a colonial periphery, and he really does not understand the social construction of honor during the late colonial period. Piccato also relies on Steve Stern's book *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (1995) as a source for understanding honor in late colonial Mexico. Stern's book, which has been seen in some circles as the cutting edge of the so-called New Cultural History, was, in the words of one of its reviewers, an exercise in "intellectual masturbation." [1] There are

other studies by historians of colonial Spanish America that explain honor more effectively, such as work by Ann Twinam who Piccato does cite in passing and Robert McCaa, among others. There was a long historiographic debate in the 1980s and 1990s over the construction of race, caste, and status in late colonial Spanish America, which was more to the point to the question of the construction of honor that is central to Piccato's study. This critique aside, Piccato has produced a first-rate monograph of the period he previously studied, and his analysis of the press at the end of the nineteenth century, the muzzling of the press by Diaz after 1885, and the legal shift in the definition of honor and defamation is first class. The book is engaging, well researched, and well written, and is an interesting read.

Note

[1]. Susan Socolow, review of *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico*, by Steve Stern, *The Americas* 53, no. 1 (July 1996): 164.

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

Citation: Robert Jackson. Review of Piccato, Pablo. *The Tyranny of Opinion: Honor in the Construction of the Mexican Public Sphere*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30865>



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