H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Silvia Marina Arrom, Servando Ortoll, eds. *Riots in the Cities: Popular Politics and the Urban Poor in Latin America 1765-1910.* Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1996. x + 248 pp. $84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2580-5; $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2581-2.

Reviewed by David B. Parker (Queen's University, Canada)

Published on H-LatAm (April, 1996)

Contents:

Silvia Marina Arrom, "Introduction: Rethinking Urban Politics in Latin America Before the Populist Era."

Anthony McFarlane, "The 'Rebellion of the Barrios': Urban Insurrection in Bourbon Quito, 1765."

Silvia Marina Arrom, "Popular Politics in Mexico City: The Parian Riot, 1828."

Joao Jose Reis, " 'Death to the Cemetery': Funerary Reform and Rebellion in Salvador, Brazil, 1836."

Sandra Lauderdale Graham, "The Vintem Riot and Political Culture: Rio de Janeiro, 1880."

David Sowell, "The 1893 Bogotazo: Artisans and Pulic Violence in Late Nineteenth-Century Bogota."

Jeffrey D. Needell, "The Revolta Contra Vacina of 1904: The Revolt against "Modernization" in Belle-Epoque Rio de Janeiro."

Avital H. Bloch and Servando Ortoll, " 'Viva Mexico! Mueran los Yanquis!': The Guadalajara Riots of 1910."

Charles Tilly, "Conclusion: Contention and the Urban Poor in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth Century Latin America."

This book compiles some of the best recent research on urban riots in Latin America during the "long Nineteenth Century" from the Bourbon Reforms to the Mexican Revolution. The time period was chosen very deliberately. Beginning in 1765 serves to make the point that late colonial revolts, once viewed primarily as precursors to Independence, had deep social roots and shared many similarities with post-Independence unrest. Ending in 1910 serves to underscore the book's central argument, that the popular classes played a crucial role in Latin American urban politics long before the onset of twentieth-century populism. Neither of those two assertions is particularly striking or controversial today, thanks in no small part to the contribution of the authors here anthologized.

Despite the fact that all the selections date from the 1980s or 1990s, the volume has something of a "retrospective" quality, perhaps because so many of the selections are already minor classics. Except for the introduction and conclusion, all the chapters have appeared previously in print, six of the seven in English, and the lion's share of those six in the *HispanicC American Historical Review.* A couple of the selections have been revised for the book, but the majority appear as they did in the original. In short, specialists in Latin American urban social history will already be familiar with most of this book, which is therefore evidently designed for classroom use.

Explicitly or implicitly, just about all of the authors in the volume engage in a dialogue with the well-known European literature on urban crowds, most notably the work of E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude'. In trying to understand what might be distinctive about Latin American riots, the majority of the contributors come surprisingly close to a consensus, which might be summed up as follows: whereas European riots tended to have a class character that became clear as soon as scholars began to look in the right places, Latin American riots tended to be far more heterogeneous, with a comparatively greater role played by dissident elites, political parties and factions, and vertical ties of patronage and clientelism. That does not mean, however, that elites

led and masses followed; indeed, most of the selections tease out the variety of distinct agendas being pursued simultaneously, and some brilliantly reconstruct the enormous range of meanings that actors of different races and classes brought to the same events.

So, for example, Silvia Arrom sees the Parian riot of 1828 in Mexico City as an expression of support for the "Yorquino" liberals led by Vicente Guerrero, but also as a popular outburst against Spanish import-export merchants, who ended up being the focal point for opposition to free trade, as well as convenient symbols of unjust wealth and privilege. Joao Jose' Reis shows that while the rebellion known as "Cemiterada" in 1836 Bahia was fomented by Catholic Church officials opposed to the secularization of burial practices, the riot can only be understood in the light of popular beliefs about death and the fate of souls. Reis convincingly argues that both Portuguese and African popular religion placed great importance on interment in sacred ground, ideally inside a church, with the belief that this was the only way to ensure safe passage to the afterlife. Afro-Brazilian religious brotherhoods were organized precisely to guarantee a good burial, providing slaves and ex-slaves in death a respect they had largely been denied in life. One can easily see the threat contained in attempts by public health-conscious municipal officials to banish all funerals to a "hygienic" burial ground on the outskirts of town.

This theme of both an elite transcript and one or several popular transcripts underlying a riot is present in virtually all of the selections included in the book. Sandra Lauderdale Graham argues that protest against a one-"vintem" tax on streetcar fares in 1880 Rio was predominantly a middle-class affair, yet it served as a pretext, a spark, for a variety of actions by different classes. The poor, the ones who actually engaged in the rioting, had a host of complaints, but streetcar fares were hardly high on their list. More significantly, the riot became a symbol for abolitionists and republicans, who for the first time took their opposition to the Empire out of the drawing rooms and into the streets. Graham thus argues that the vintem riot highlighted and contributed to an epochal change in Brazil's political practices, rules, and culture.

Of all the writers, Jeff Needell is perhaps the most explicit in formulating the argument that a single riot can mean entirely different things to different people, even to different groups of rioters. He writes that the 1904 Revolta Contra Vacina, also in Rio, was in fact "two revolts, one of which consciously, the other perhaps unconsciously, fought under the useful banner of a constitutional and medical issue of little real moment." (p. 183). On the one hand, the riot was a popular rebellion not just against forced vaccination but against the municipal government's massive program of slum eradication and forced relocation of the poor. On the other hand, it was also an organized bid for power by radical opponents to the Rodrigues Alves government, who tried to mount a military coup. The conspirators and the masses each threw fuel on the other's fire, and together they came close to bringing down a regime, but their goals were never really the same.

The final selection is the only one that has not been published previously in English. Looking at anti-American riots in 1910 Guadalajara, Avital Bloch and Servando Ortoll repeat many of the book's central themes, and add one more piece to the puzzle: the role of the authorities. They show that despite the vaunted Porfirian openness to foreigners, police in Guadalajara had traditionally expected and allowed anti-American protests by students and other groups, especially around Independence Day. Nationalism and anti-Protestantism were hardly a threat to the regime; indeed, allowing some occasional venting of steam against the American scapegoat may have been seen as a useful ritual. Only when the riots got out of hand, in the wake of the lynching and burning of a young Mexican in Texas, did the police finally step in.

The short introduction by Silvia Arrom does a good job of setting up the readings to come, and of outlining the issues at stake. The conclusion by Charles Tilly says much that is intelligent and reasonable about urban riots in general, emphasizing his long disagreements with Hobsbawm and Rude'. He then provides a nice taxonomy of approaches to, and issues raised by, the study of rioting and urban popular politics. Tilly does not demonstrate much of an interest in Latin America, however. His own observations about the region come across as either superficial or irrelevant, and he mostly seems taken aback by what he sees as the comparative underdevelopment of the scholarship. Perhaps not understanding the odyssey that most of these authors went through in chasing down their primary sources, he seems not to appreciate fully their accomplishments, even though he praises them.

All in all, for a collection of this type, the quality of the selections is very high and unusually consistent. All of the contributions are well researched and almost all are extremely well written. The two selections that I chose not to summarize, Anthony McFarlane on the "Rebellion of the Barrios" in Bourbon Quito and David Sowell on

the "1893 Bogotazo," both meet the very same high standards as the others, and I apologize for having left them out. The editing and production of the book are professional in every way. It was also a treat to find a list of recommended readings and even an index, a rare thing in an edited collection.

The one major shortcoming I see with the book is the lack of controversy, or even of significant disagreement, from one author to the next. We do not find in this book any real debate about the meaning, importance, or interpretation of urban riots. All the writers believe that urban riots are enormously important in Latin American history. All agree that the study of urban riots provides an excellent window on popular culture and the mentalite' of the masses. All share an implicit belief that popular attitudes and actions are shaped by numerous forces, of which the economy is only one. All believe that the urban masses had significant power, and that elites were forced to take them seriously. So if this is a book designed for classroom use, what controversy is there to keep students engaged? Where's the discussion? Why not include some piece that argues that these riots WERE in fact ephemeral aberrations, and that most of the time, normal popular culture was one of deference and obedience? This is by no means my own position, but why not let this side at least be heard? One possible counterpoint, for example, might have been Eric Van Young's prize-winning "Islands in the Storm: Quiet Cities and Violent Countrysides in the Mexican Independence Era," *Past and Present* 118 (February 1988).

In sum, I wonder whether a more diverse and wide-ranging collection might not have proved a better teaching tool. The inevitable price would have been a loss of some of the consistency and coherence that in other ways makes this book so strong, but it might have been a price worth paying.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam

Citation: David B. Parker. Review of Arrom, Silvia Marina; Ortoll, Servando, eds., *Riots in the Cities: Popular Politics and the Urban Poor in Latin America 1765-1910.* H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 1996.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=390

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.