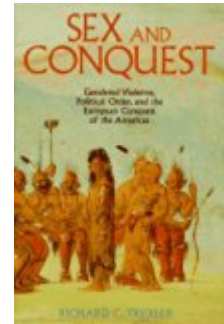


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## The Conquests of Men

Richard C. Trexler's recent work on homosexual practices among native Americans, as described mainly by Spanish sources during the initial period of European-American contact, offers an original and thought-provoking look at this relatively understudied subject. The book not only bridges European and American analytical fields but links the topic of homosexual practices to broader theoretical questions, such as the relationship between gendered sexual violence and power; between sexual discourses and the political order. Despite its contributions, however, the work is not without problems. After summarizing the main objectives and arguments, I will discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of the study.

### Objectives and Arguments

The main objective of *Sex and Conquest* is "to describe and analyze American homosexual practices and the male transvestism often associated with them, as the Iberians heard of these practices during their original contacts with the many peoples of what would come to be called Latin America" (p. 2). Yet relying mainly on Spanish sources presents the methodological and analytical problem of understanding Spanish/European discourses of sexuality in native American cultural contexts and the power issues involved in such discourses. This problematic informs a second objective of study: to explore the relationship between political and sexual domination ("between conquest and eros") not only in those native American homosexual practices described by Iberians,

but in Iberian thinking. The book therefore begins with two chapters dedicated to those Mediterranean practices and notions that, Trexler argues, shaped Iberian attitudes toward homosexual behavior in the Americas: chapter one analyzes sexual structures in ancient Mediterranean cultures; and chapter two explores homosexual behavior and dominant ideas about sexuality in Islamic and Christian Spain.

In addition to giving a broad overview of Mediterranean homosexual practices, the first two chapters provide certain conceptual tools (for example, the meaning of categories such as "active", "passive", and "effeminacy" in Mediterranean cultures) that will be necessary for analyzing Spanish discourses about sexuality in the "New World." More important, the opening chapter provides the theoretical backbone of the book; the premises and arguments that will resurface in later chapters. As the title itself suggests, the central concern of *Sex and Conquest* is the relationship between sexual violence and power. At its most ambitious, the book seeks to relate the use of sexual violence in conquest to the establishment of power relations and the institutionalization of those relations in socio-political structures

The overarching argument is two-fold and can be summarized as follows: first, homosexual practices emerged in the field of battle as primary forms of exerting and manifesting power over defeated enemies by gendering them as female; and second, those gendered homosexual practices that originated in conquest served

as the basis of the political and social order, indeed, as the foundation for the patriarchal state—here defined as a “status”, “that is, a forceful [sic] collectivity of males under another male” (p. 102).

The connection between homosexual behavior in war and the development of the socio-political order is introduced in chapter one, in which Trexler analyzes homosexual rape and other types of gendered sexual violence (such as castration, circumcision, and evisceration) in the conquest activities of ancient Mediterranean cultures. Gerda Lerner’s classic study of the ancient Near East, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, which sought to root the historical subordination of women in early struggles to the control of property, functions as the reference point. As a kind of extension of Lerner’s thesis that the rape and enslavement of women captured in battle served as a means to claim property, Trexler argues that men too were raped in battle and that the sexual subordination of men by other men was linked not only to the control of property (mainly in the form of women) but to the desire to establish and reinforce power. Acts of homosexual violence created and manifested power by effeminizing; that is, by rendering certain men subordinate and dependent “as women and boys” (pp. 19-21). According to Trexler, these processes of establishing hierarchies through genderization would go on to structure domestic power relations between men—as manifested, for example, in the ancient institution of “homosexual marriages,” whereby men of authority, patriarchs, not only received sexual and economic services from young men but reinforced their power by publicly displaying their retinues of dependent (and therefore effeminized) boys in processions.

In sum, Trexler’s analysis of ancient Mediterranean homosexual behavior and institutions introduces a model of incipient state formation that functions as a theoretical framework for his study of native Americans at the time of the conquest. This framework is most evident in chapters three to five, which look at homosexual practices—embodied in the figure of the berdache—in three different domains: war, domestic civil society, and the temple.

Following the premise that sexual structures and institutions have their origins in war (that they emerge “not inside but outside” societies [p. 8]), the study of homosexual practices in American cultures begins in the fields of battle and military diplomacy. Colonial accounts by Caveza de Vaca, Lopez de Gomara, and Le Moyne de Morges, among others, provide Trexler with examples of gendering behaviors in the conquest activities of

groups such as the Caribs, the Tumucua, and the Texcocans. Along with a number of acts of sexual violence such as sodomitic rape, castration, and evisceration (symbolic rape), the practice of forcing men to transvest emerges in some of these sources as part of the punitive gendering inflicted by indigenous Americans either on outcast members of their own armies or on defeated enemies of war, on “outsiders.” The berdache that early European accounts claim to have found amid the military and diplomatic activities of native Americans, in other words, is to be understood within a whole culture of military violence that forced a “feminine” (that is, “receptive” or “passive”) sexual role upon victims to symbolize their subjection.

After locating transvestism in the field of war and diplomacy, Trexler shifts in chapter four to a discussion of the berdache in domestic civil relations. In this chapter, Trexler examines the functions served by transvested males and argues that young berdache (as opposed to “senior berdache” or men who began transvesting at older age and who appear to have been a different case altogether) were the product of social and cultural forces, not innate or biological characteristics. Drawing not only from colonial accounts but from nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographic data on indigenous groups from North America, Trexler argues that in many native American cultures, certain boys were gendered female and made to cross-dress by their parents or the community/tribe as a whole—a practice that was sometimes associated with a shortage of girls and the need to assign women’s share of the division of labor. At about the onset of puberty, however, these transvested boys became sexually active (as “passives”) and a kind of commodity in familial exchange systems that had the ultimate purpose of providing temporary young “wives” for nubile men.

The main social function of young berdache, in short, was to service other young men sexually, in some cases in order to prevent the rape of women. But this parental practice of gendering boys as female, contends Trexler, could also lead to the use of the berdache for economic and political purposes. Citing colonial sources that refer to the economic transactions that sometimes accompanied making berdache available to young men, Trexler argues that men with temporary berdache “wives” probably rented them to other young males, simultaneously profiting and creating a retinue of male subjects: “From a familial exchange process, it is but one big step up to the political process, where lords are found building the state, that is, transindividual status, through a similar merchandizing of male youth” (p. 94).

The argument that young transvested males provided sexual, economic, and political services to men of authority is extended in chapter five to the religious domain. In this chapter Trexler claims that transvestism and sodomy were common activities in the temples of the Incas and Aztecs. Furthermore, through an elaborate analysis of the functions of berdache in Incan temples (including a discussion of the link between Andean religious corporal expressions and sexual postures and a study of art objects depicting anal intercourse from the eighth century Moche culture of northwestern Peru), Trexler tries to show that transvested boys were religious resources for lords and that the publicly performed anal rapes of the young berdache were acts of domination that were ultimately intended to depict the physical subjection of young men to religious lords (p. 117).

Chapters three to five thus attempt to establish that the native American practice of cross-dressing originated in war as a form of punitive gendering; that there was a close relationship between cross-dressing and engaging in homosexual intercourse as a “passive”; and that gendering young boys female through forced sexual intercourse (and transvestism) was one of the primary mechanisms employed by political and religious lords to build and display power. The last chapters of the book (6-8) cover a range of topics, including a discussion of other social aspects of the berdache (such as appearance, age, occupations, and numbers); an analysis of Spanish discourses on native American sodomy; an assessment of Iberian and native American attitudes toward transvestism and homosexual behavior; and a summary of the main points made in the book.

With this synthesis of some of the primary arguments and themes of *Sex and Conquest*, it is now possible to make a few observations about the contributions, as well as weaknesses, of the study.

#### Assessment

Given the extent to which conquest and early colonial sources claimed to have witnessed cross-dressing and sodomy in the “New World,” it seems rather strange that few scholars have attempted to unravel Spanish discourses about native American transvestism and sexuality—to study what these discourses reveal, if anything, about practices among indigenous peoples; about the power issues involved in such discourses; and, ultimately, about the gendered nature of Spanish colonialism. By undertaking a study of what European accounts said regarding homosexual behavior and cross-dressing among native Americans at the time of contact,

Trexler is thus treading on a relatively uncharted ground in Spanish-American colonial studies. The book is innovative not only in terms of its topic but in terms of its methodological approach, which combines a close reading of various European accounts with the use of scholarship on native North Americans. The result is an impressive compilation of information and anecdotal evidence on the practices of transvestism and homosexual sodomy in the Americas that, at the very least, should inspire more scholars of Latin America—colonial and otherwise—to consider the importance of sexuality and gender in the construction of power relations.

Indeed, one of the strongest sections of Trexler’s work is his discussion of the interaction between sex and gender in conquest. Analyzing a large number of examples of conquest behaviors from native American, as well as Mediterranean, contexts, Trexler effectively argues that sexual violence is used by men to “brand men as akin to women”; and furthermore, that gendering men female through sexual violence is a fundamental way of creating and manifesting power. In the process, the author not only reveals that sexual behavior, and specifically the act of sexual penetration, is an important field of power relations, but that gender is a useful category of analysis for understanding relations between men. Given the persistent tendency in scholarship (as well as in mainstream culture) to equate gender with women or to treat gender mainly in terms of male–female power dynamics, Trexler’s look at gendering processes between men is undoubtedly a useful contribution.

Despite Trexler’s insightful discussion of sex, gender, and power in conquest, there are several theoretical and methodological problems with the study. Some of the main theoretical problems stem from the argument that Trexler sets up at the beginning of the book to explain ancient Mediterranean “sexual structures” and that becomes a model for explaining the relationship of sexual violence between men to the construction of the patriarchal order. First, the model makes too rigid a distinction between sexual violence against women—explained as a means to claim property—and sexual violence against men—explained not only as a means of reclaiming property (women) but of creating power—consequently erasing women, and violence against women, from the historical construction of power. Second, the model relies on the all too vague explanatory factor of “desires” (that is, desires to control property and to accumulate power were at the root of sexual violence, p. 7), and leaves unresolved the questions of why desires for property and power emerge in the first place and, more important, how

they function at the level of the collectivity. Are human desires not socially constructed? And third, to the extent that it is a theory which presupposes that the same principles are always at work (that males desire property and power; that male is always high and female low), Trexler's model not only homogenizes patriarchy, but results in an ahistorical and essentialized vision of men and women and of human relations.

The consequences of adopting such an ahistorical theoretical approach are most evident in the final pages of the book (pp. 176-180), in which the author tries to account for the persistence of sexual violence between men, and especially for the sexual abuse of boys by older men, from ancient through modern times (in Western and non-Western societies). Drawing on Freudian conceptualizations, Trexler frames the problem in terms of the ongoing efforts by fathers (or the collectivity) to keep their sons (those who might challenge established property rights and power) subordinate by effeminizing them. Sexual violence between men, across space and time, is thus explained as the product of struggles over property and power, of those sexual structures which constitute the patriarchal order. Beyond the fact that it links "homosexual behavior" too closely with violence and child abuse, Trexler's argument is problematic because, by providing such a monolithic view of male dominance, it renders culture irrelevant for understanding practices which, as Trexler himself argues, are the products of social and cultural forces.

Given the limitations of Trexler's theoretical model, then, it is not surprising that one of the main problems with his study of homosexual practices among native Americas at the time of the conquest is the lack of cultural and historical specificity. To support his overarching argument—that male cross-dressing and homosexual sodomy among native Americas originated in conquest as punishments; that these forms of punitive gendering became institutionalized in the form of the domestic berdache; and that the purpose of the berdache as a domestic, social institution was to provide sexual, economic and political services to men of authority—Trexler relies on examples and evidence from a wide variety of regional, cultural, and temporal contexts. While this method was perhaps due to the scattered nature of information itself, it results less in a convincing argument than in a series of examples of homosexual and cross-dressing practices that seem disengaged from their specific cultural and historical contexts.

The ease with which Trexler moves across space and

time to shed light on male homosexual behavior and transvestism among native Americans not only implies that cultural and historical specificity does not matter, but assumes that native American cultures have similar systems of meaning and representation. Can male cross-dressing practices among eighteenth-century native American groups from the eastern coast of the United States be used to explain the practices of, say, the pre-Columbian Aztecs, for which cross-dressing was part of a highly complex, and still little understood, cosmology? To give another example, can analyzing the meaning of art objects from the eighth-century Moche culture help unravel the meaning of temple sexual behaviors not only among the Incas but other native American cultures at about the time of the conquest? Are native American cultures that homogenous...and that static?

A related problem is that, although much of the information on homosexual behavior and transvestism is drawn from colonial accounts, there is little discussion of the contexts in which these works were produced. Considering the fact that the topic of sodomy, like cannibalism, could be used (and was) as a justification for conquest, Trexler's use of colonial accounts needed to be accompanied by a discussion of the social and political circumstances under which these accounts were written; of the specific projects in which the colonial historians-conquerors, royal bureaucrats, and missionaries—he relies on were involved; and of the production of the "histories of native American sodomy" as colonial enterprises, written for specific audiences and purposes. Trexler's failure to "contextualize the texts" (which carries over to the handling of visual illustrations, see especially pp. 68-69 and 83-84), not only makes the colonial accounts seem as if they were produced in a vacuum, but in the end does not help lessen one of the crucial problems of his study: making a convincing case for why these accounts, written mostly by Europeans and Creoles (Europeans born in the Americas), should be treated as sources of information on native American homosexual practices.

Trexler himself raises the problem of sources, of relying primarily on the "colonizer" to learn about such a polemical subject as homosexual sodomy among the "colonized," at several points in the book. He primarily deals with the problem by undertaking a close reading of the sources and by paying particularly close attention to the role of Spanish or Iberian notions of sexuality. While this method does help explain certain aspects of colonial discourses (such as the ways in which European theories of cultural development, of "civilization," shaped Spanish understandings and depictions of native American sexu-

ality), Trexler nonetheless does not provide a convincing explanation as to why he uses many of the colonial accounts' references to, and descriptions of, native American homosexual behavior as actual evidence.

In chapter seven, Trexler does account for why he dismisses the claims made by the historiographical tradition that emerged in the mid-sixteenth century and that downplayed, even denied, the practice of sodomy among the Aztecs and Incas. According to Trexler, this tradition arose because of the need by colonial historians (such as Bartolome de las Casas, Motolinia, and Cieza de Leon) and "mestizo nativists" (such as Garcilaso de la Vega and Ixtlilxochitl) to regender as "macho" those empires that the Spaniards had defeated and that had, because of the imperatives of conquest, been rendered effeminate (p. 149). Though it is true that certain European and mestizo writers might have had political reasons for minimizing the practice of sodomy among the Aztecs and Incas, it is also true that those who claimed that it was practiced widely or who claimed to have witnessed it had political agendas of their own. On what basis, then, does Trexler accept what Peter of Ghent, Bernal Diaz, and Lopez de Gomara said about Mesoamerican or Andean sodomy? What makes their claims credible? Furthermore, why are Las Casas and Cieza de Leon reliable when they are acknowledging homosexual practices in certain Aztec or Incan provinces and not when they are denying the existence of widespread sodomy? Addressing these questions more fully might have made Trexler's use of evidence more persuasive and his arguments more solid.

Finally, although Trexler's main agenda in this book is to shed light on "homosexual practices" and cross-dressing among native Americans, the strong case that he makes regarding the role of sexual violence in conquest, as well as the period that he focuses on, inevitably raises the issue of the use of sexual violence in the Span-

ish conquest of the Americas. Trexler makes references to the gendering of native American men by Europeans—in fact, in his view, native American men, even the "macho" Aztecs and Incas, were in the end all gendered female by the conquerors and the conquest, a problematic rendering since it emasculates *all* native American men (see, for instance, the totalizing conclusions in the last paragraph of p. 140)—but he alludes mainly to rhetorical or symbolic ways of gendering, such as the placing of penis-like gibbets (the "picotas" or "picanas") in the outskirts of colonial towns. Surprisingly, however, he does not discuss the issue of actual sexual violence inflicted by Europeans. If Spanish colonial accounts are not forthcoming on this topic, are there any sources that might indicate whether the Spaniards used rape or other forms of gendered violence against indigenous men?

Decades ago, Magnus Morner (*Race Mixture*, 1967), referring in part to the sexual violence perpetrated against indigenous women (and unfortunately also to the "propensity" of native women to be "smitten" by the conquistadors), called the conquest of the Americas a "conquest of women." While historians have yet to systematically explore the use of sexual violence against women during and after the Spanish conquest, they have ventured even less into the problem of sexual violence against men. Perhaps some of the themes that Trexler explores in *Sex and Conquest*, will lead colonial scholars to begin analyzing the role that sexual violence toward *both* men and women played in the conquest; to study the extent to which the conquest of the Americas was not only a "conquest of women," but also a "conquest of men," and the extent to which it was neither.

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