

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Elizabeth E. Brusco.** *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. x + 203 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-70821-1; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-70820-4.

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For many scholar-teachers who might consider a study of Protestant evangelism in Colombia hardly central to their concerns, Elizabeth E. Brusco's book proves a pleasant surprise. First, by tackling the topic of machismo head on, the author raises major questions about contemporary family structure and conjugal relations. Second, it is a viable option as required reading for undergraduates in the Latin American survey. Third, the variety of peripheral topics Brusco discusses should help teachers organize their twentieth-century lectures in a fresh way, this time focusing on Colombia, frequently neglected in survey courses because of the paucity of suitable materials.

Far from the conservative world view proposed by the Billy Grahams and the Oral Robertses who typically represent the Protestant electronic ministry familiar to North Americans, Lutheran evangelism has created no less than a revolutionary shift in the functioning of those Colombian families who profess its values and practices, according to Brusco. Evangelical religious rhetoric and its discontents, however, only incidentally appear in this work.

The real drama of *Reformation of Machismo* is not the religious content of the conversion experience, but rather the effects of that conversion on the dynamics of the Colombian family of the 1990s. The central question posed by the author concerns the effects of conversion (an emotional expression of "finding Jesus in your life") on the domestic reality of the Colombian household, especially as it affects conjugal relations in the broadest sense.

To evangelical Protestants, conversion implies unseating the core values of male behavior enshrined in machismo. Machismo (as the set of values held by the dominant culture specifying desirable male qualities) is understood as virility, courage, and bravado. It is expressed by typical macho behaviors of drinking,

smoking, gambling, and extramarital sexual liaisons. Macho behavior patterns entail supporting costly "vices" in the public world of men. Support of those vices occurs at the direct expense of the quality of life of families dependent on macho breadwinners. The author calls male alienation from the private world of his own household "domestic abdication."

What happens to the macho value system when the husband converts to evangelical Protestantism? He swears off the traditional masculine vices like drinking and partying most of the weekend and reintegrates himself into the household. He assumes the role of husband and father he may have neglected since the early days of his marriage and participates actively in the church community. For many men, no longer having to maintain the facade of unrelieved masculinity and bravado is a great relief; the private world of household and loved ones is preferable to the public world of men. Brusco writes that "In Colombia, machismo is, over the long run, very demanding and difficult for all under its sway, including the males who must perform this role" (p. 120). Thus Brusco moves the discussion of machismo far beyond the limits of Octavio Paz and familiar Mexican connotations.

Those changed male behaviors result in a radical reorientation of family consumption patterns. If formerly a goodly share of the husband's income was diverted into wine, women, and song, that income is now channeled toward the welfare of the entire family. Thus individual consumption by the father/husband turns into collective spending on a better diet and educating the children.

Another major shift takes place within the family, in the sphere of power relations between spouses. If the macho husband was characterized by drunkenness, infidelity, and even physical abuse of wife and

children, the converted husband is pacific (appropriate New Testament behavior) and his attentions focused on his marriage and home life. Upon his conversion, however, he adopts a value system sharply at odds with the values prescribed for males by the dominant culture.

Husbands by no means hand over all their power at conversion. Although male conversion is certainly useful for the wife/mother of the family, her husband's new involvement with religion and the family does not represent automatic ascendancy over her husband and much less an egalitarian relationship (as we gringos like to imagine one, even if we don't often practice it). Brusco writes from a declared position as a feminist Marxist scholar, but nonfeminist or nonmaterialist scholars will not find her analysis intruding unduly on the materials she presents.

Usefulness as Assigned Reading for Undergraduates

The book is organized into eight brief (approx. 15-page) chapters, followed by a fascinating appendix in which Brusco describes the subjects of her fieldwork. In addition to their brevity, the chapters are made even more accessible by frequent subheadings within each chapter. (The illustrations are less obviously connected to the themes discussed in the text and thus not entirely useful in holding the attention of undergraduates.)

If an instructor's approach to teaching the survey course involves presenting a seamless narrative flow in lectures, the Brusco book may not be entirely suitable. With its occasional reference to theories from various disciplines, which students may need to have reinforced with classroom work, *Reformation of Machismo* is good practice in testing theory against research results. Used properly, it may aid in skill-building by providing a relativist approach to the production of knowledge. On the other hand, if an instructor is uncomfortable with Max Weber or feedback systems theory, the Brusco book may be less useful.

#### Other Thematic Treatments

Besides machismo and family dynamics, Brusco presents a number of topics that may be useful in developing or refining the survey course. The most suggestive themes are outlined briefly here.

A) Religion - Most Latin American surveys treat religion in the colonial period and may or may not reintroduce the topic later. The Brusco book presents

not only a history of evangelism in twentieth-century Colombia but also the Catholic world view, especially its impact on household dynamics. She characterizes Colombia as a "theocratic state" since the late nineteenth century and portrays priests in the pre-Violencia era as temporal powerbrokers. Thus several threads are present which could be used to reintegrate religion into the latter part of the Latin American survey.

B) Rural-urban migration - The author has chosen families with members situated in the rural highland region of El Cocuy as well as relatives who have migrated to Bogota. Brusco presents ample evidence to substantiate Bryan Roberts' claim that modern Latin American urban centers are "cities of peasants." Her accounts of individual families give human dimensions to the larger process of urban migration and resettlement.

C) Violencia - Although we still lack a convincing explanation for the Violencia (1946-1966), which claimed hundreds of thousands of Colombian lives, Brusco's presentation makes it possible to include it in a survey course. The Violencia is typical of the us-them conflicts that later emerged in Central America; indeed, it is a prototype of violence from above where military and paramilitary forces were used to enforce the politics of exclusion. Both Liberals and evangelical Protestants were targeted during the red-baiting atmosphere of the Violencia. Brusco presents the firsthand account of Graciliano, who was persecuted as a young evangelical in El Cocuy. That account should provide grist for student discussion of political violence. Indeed, the lack of an easy categorization of Colombia's violence should not preclude its discussion.

D) Social mobility - The economic changes of the last twenty years, especially the debt crisis and economic shocks of the early 1980s, have been profound. The poorest Latin Americans have suffered the negative impact in their household economies. Nevertheless the process of social and economic mobility that began earlier in the present century still holds for many Latin Americans. Social mobility or its tantalizing possibility may be a major reason for the lack of widespread political unrest in the face of structural readjustment and the other draconian measures enforced by international lending agencies. Brusco's evangelical converts, with their Protestant aestheticism and "prosperity ethic," provide excellent human examples of social mobility and its linkage to the

Latin American version of “family values.”

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