

Rachel Hynson. *Laboring for the State: Women, Family, and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 332 pp. \$39.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-18867-9.

Reviewed by Anasa Hicks (Florida State University)

Published on H-LatAm (June, 2020)

Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

It is an exciting time to study the Cuban Revolution: in the last ten years, scholars like Lillian Guerra, Devyn Spence-Benson, Michelle Chase, and Elise Andaya have all broken new ground in excavating the historical roots and consequences of the 1959 takeover of Cuba by radical young nationalists. Rachel Hynson's new book, *Laboring for the State: Women, Family, and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971*, is an excellent addition to this growing body of literature that challenges both the chronology and the content of the Cuban government's own narrative of its revolution. Hynson's use of the Cuban family as a unit of analysis offers a fresh perspective on the transformations of the 1960s, revealing previously obscured conflicts between and choices of the Cuban government and the island's citizens. The revelation that the (seemingly) personal is political is old. But Hynson's chapters on abortion, marriage, sex work and "unconventional employment" dig into the aphorism, improving our understanding of revolutionary Cuba and offering a methodological path forward for other historical studies.

Laboring for the State argues that between 1959 and 1971, the revolutionary Cuban government engaged in social engineering to remodel Cuban families. The ideal "New Family," an extension of Ernesto "Che" Guevara's vision of Cuba's "New Man," would help push forward Cuba's new

socialist agenda. Opponents to Fidel Castro's rule have often accused the Cuban revolutionary government of seeking to destroy the biological family and replace it with Communist control, but Hynson demonstrates that an unwavering belief in the Eurocentric patriarchal two-parent family actually undergirded many policies in the 1960s. Conflict arose between government and citizens when Cubans rejected the standards of familial legitimacy upon which the new government insisted. In four thematic chapters, each covering the same twelve-year period, Hynson explores how the revolutionary government attempted to link labor to morality and regulate both: specifically, she argues that the Cuban government attempted to shape Cuban men into their families' primary wage-earners and criminalize reliance on female wages. It is no coincidence that in the same time period, the Cuban revolutionary government transitioned from a democratic to an authoritarian method of governance.

Hynson brilliantly teases out the racial implications of the policies she describes. Fidel Castro declared anti-black racism "finished" in Cuba after 1961; as a result, explicit references to racial distinctions or racial tension can be difficult to find in sources after 1961. But Hynson expertly extrapolates the racial undertones of revolutionary policy from less than obvious sources. In her first

chapter, for example, Hynson describes early efforts to regulate women's reproductive activity. In 1964 the Cuban government introduced intrauterine devices from Chile to Havana's shantytowns and to Manzanillo, Santiago, Guantánamo, and other eastern cities. Both locations had high concentrations of Afro-Cuban women, and Hynson argues that the focus on those locales "illustrates the degree to which women of color may have been the targets of government control over women's reproduction" (p. 75). In the second chapter, Hynson notes that efforts to force Cubans into legitimate legal marriages were the least prominent in Oriente province, where the population of black Cubans was higher. The Cuban government has a long history of excessive interest in the reproductive and conjugal activity of African-descended people. By cross-referencing Cuba's racialized geography with revolutionary policy, Hynson demonstrates how that tradition extended into the 1960s.

Cuban citizens' counternarrative to the government's grand narrative of the revolution is a key element of *Laboring for the State's* argument. Often, Cubans expressed and disseminated their counternarratives through *bolas*, or rumors, and Hynson's excavation of these *bolas* is another impressive achievement of the book. Rumors spread in the early 1960s that the government had criminalized abortions; in the mid-1960s that a forced labor camp had emerged on the Guanahacabibes peninsula in western Cuba; in the late 1960s that weddings would be prohibited. At the core of each of these rumors was a kernel of truth, and each of the rumors forced some kind of government action. Scholars of the Caribbean have long known that rumors play an essential role in social and political life; *Laboring for the State* shows how *bolas* served as a form of resistance to state narratives and state repression.

Hynson concludes that by the Cuban government's own standards, revolutionary efforts to shape a "New Family" failed: today divorce and

abortion rates in Cuba are among the highest in the world, and prostitution is as rampant as it was before 1959. Revolutionary officials insist that the failure is due to Cubans' insufficient dedication to the revolution, but Hynson argues that it is the fault of the government itself. In forcing narrow and Eurocentric visions of work and family onto Cubans, the government all but ensured that citizens would resist. In her conclusion, she notes that Cubans who find work outside of the state apparatus, who engage in sex work, who are common-law married but not legally married function without knowledge of the historical legacies of their practices. This is on purpose: Hynson echoes Lillian Guerra's formulation of the Cuban Revolution as a palimpsest, whereby the government constantly erases their past actions to inscribe *new* policies, insisting that the past action did not happen or is now irrelevant.

Laboring for the State undoes the palimpsest. Its granular history of the evolution of state policy toward the Cuban family makes it impossible to ignore the historical roots of what the government sees as "problems" today. Hynson's deconstruction of propaganda and rumors and reconstruction of the likely truth is a valuable project in a country whose government so highly values history, and where disputes over *what really happened* take on monumental political importance. Drawing on varied and fascinating sources, Hynson has written a social history of the first twelve years of revolutionary Cuba, and explained to her audience how those years shaped Cuba today. Students of the revolution in Cuba and social upheaval elsewhere would do well to follow her impressive example.

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

Citation: Anasa Hicks. Review of Hynson, Rachel. *Laboring for the State: Women, Family, and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. June, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54947>



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