

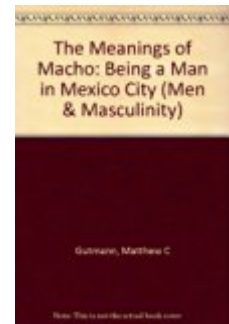
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Matthew C. Gutmann. *The Meaning of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996. xiv + 330 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20236-8; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20234-4.

Reviewed by Deborah Cohen (University of Chicago)  
Published on H-Urban (August, 1998)



## Complicating

Passing by a music store in central Mexico City in 1989, Matthew Gutmann saw a man behind the store counter, working and holding a baby. This image so caught his attention that he whipped out his camera and captured it for posterity. Skip ahead in time to his return to the U.S. After he developed the film, he showed the picture around to various anthropologists and friends. One replied: “We know they’re all machos in Mexico.”

Thus begins anthropologist Matthew Gutmann’s journey into the worlds of Mexican men. To enter these worlds, Gutmann, along with his wife and seven-week old daughter, moved to Santo Domingo, a working-class *colonia* [neighborhood, my translation; hereafter, unless otherwise noted, all translations are Gutmann’s] in Mexico City and the setting for this ethnographic study. In his book, he attacks—and puts to rest—the widely-held notion that there is a single, all-pervasive Mexican masculinity that of the “macho.”

This legacy of the “macho”—the tequila-slinging, fun-loving, philandering, gun- and guitar-toting man, who’s sometimes lazy, other times hard-working, often hot-headed, frequently slow to anger—Gutmann claims, can be found in works as diverse as those of Oscar Lewis, Evelyn Stevens, and David Gilmore [1], among other anthropologists. Under no circumstances would this “macho” dirty his hands changing diapers, cutting up vegetables, or washing dishes that would be “women’s work.” Absolutely no “macho” would let his wife be seen in public without him, unless, of course, she were walking the kids

to school or buying food at the local market. And only he has the right to inhabit the streets after dark, to go wherever he pleases whenever it pleases him.

In this suggestive and compelling ethnography, Gutmann argues that not one, but a variety of masculinities are in play in today’s complicated worlds of Mexico City. After all, Mexico City, or el distrito federal (DF)—is a highly cosmopolitan, global megalopolis in which it’s as easy to get a hamburger as a taco, where cell phones, *Los Simpson*, and luxury gated communities butt up against corrugated cardboard “homes,” and where children shine shoes and sell gum on streets in a city home to more than 20 million residents.

While not directly tackling the thorny issue of whether or not “the macho” ever predominated as “the” masculinity in Mexico, Gutmann’s study instead reveals the real-life complexities of Mexican masculinity that exists today, by asking what “being a man” means. This meaning, negotiated and re-negotiated in daily practices and rituals enacted in multiple sites, is made not just by men, says Gutmann, but by men “and women.”

Moreover, just as Mexico City inhabits both the global and the local, Mexican masculinity, asserts the author, is also struggled over not in isolation but “in relation to the changes in cultural beliefs and practices that have occurred in urban Mexico over the course of several decades of local and global upheaval. Looking at how [being a man] is forged and transformed in [the complex lives] of [this] working-class community should provide a potent

antidote to the notion that especially virulent strains of sexism are found only in Mexico” (pp. 11, 4).

Yet, although Gutmann provides that needed corrective and adds much to the literature both on masculinity and on contemporary Mexico City, I nevertheless found the book somewhat disappointing, due to underlying conceptual problems that often obscure the insight of Gutmann’s work.

The initial chapter outlines Gutmann’s basic argument—that masculinity is not static but continually contested—and lays out where this continuous action takes place on the ground. Yet, Gutmann claims, any study must account for both structure and agency. We must never forget that we are “all, in a very real sense, products of our societies. What constitutes *good and bad gender identities* [my emphasis, the use of which is a subject for an entire other review or discussion] and relations for women and men in Santo Domingo is not knowable through abstract discourse on culture” (p. 9). An examination of masculinity, he contends, must instead analyze the daily practices of masculinity, “examples of what men say and do among themselves, and occasionally with women”—and use them “as illustrative of several central issues, from images of what [to be a man] means to different men and women at different times, to move towards a degendering of certain aspects of daily life among sections of the urban poor today in Mexico.”

Teasing through what men do—and say they do—Gutmann suggests that we can and indeed must reposition working-class and poor men and women, constantly “the objects of scorn and pity,” as subjects. He contends that they do not merely “survive” under social practices but instead “have learned to manipulate the cultural rituals and social laws of machismo” (p. 3).

The central seven chapters—respectively titled “Imaginary Fathers, Genuine Fathers,” “Motherly Presumptions and Presumptuous Mothers,” “Men’s Sex,” “Diapers and Dishes, Words and Deeds,” “Degendering Alcohol,” “Fear and Loathing in Male Violence,” and “Machismo”—explore the multiplicity of ways that men act as fathers, sons, husbands, and sexual beings. [Interestingly, the book dedicates no specific chapter to exploring men’s relationship to work or as worker, the label that “man” and masculinity is often so closely linked to or conflated with.] Here he lays out in great detail the numerous and varied ways in which men “perform” their masculinity, using not only men’s words and perspectives, but women’s, as well.

In “Motherly Presumptions and Presumptuous Mothers,” Gutmann focuses on the role that mothers play in making their sons boys and eventually men. He contends quite convincingly that “most [men] define their masculinity in relation to the women in their lives...[A]s often as not for these men, manliness is seen as whatever women are not” (p. 89). This chapter also shows the reader the richness and texture of community life, by exploring the multiple spaces and ways that women can now participate in the community. He weaves in ideas about women’s liberation, “traditional” female roles, and how women act today to unearth ideas about *la mujer abnegada o liberada* (the submissive, self-sacrificing, and long-suffering woman or the liberated woman). Even though los Santodomingues (residents of Santo Domingo) have both a collective memory of women as active—even central—participants in the community, the author laments that most women and girls continue to bear the weight of traditional divisions of labor and cultural ideas. Still, “a transformation [is] taking place in the ways of thinking and doing, ushering in novel [gender] arrangements and imaginings” (p. 110).

Yet for all that Gutmann has done to erase the notion that all Mexican men, regardless of their class or sexuality, educational background, ethnicity or location within the country, aspire to, and act like, “the macho”; for all he has accomplished in making Mexican masculinities more complicated, fluid, and changing—both of which are substantial achievements—the book has certain flaws too critical to ignore.

Chapter one, “Real Mexican Machos Are Born to Die,” defines the study’s key terms and lays out the theoretical issues important to the project and methodological framework with which this study engages. Gutmann relies principally on Antonio Gramsci’s “hegemony” and “contradictory consciousness” (here defined as tensions resulting from both a consciousness inherited uncritically from the past and one more experientially based), and Raymond Williams’ “emergent cultural practice” (the idea that “culture” is not fixed but allows individuals to be cultural creators), which he, in turn, calls “cultural creativity.”

This chapter, however, is not particularly helpful in illuminating the richest part of Gutmann’s material, the minute details of the daily lives of the residents of Santo Domingo. First, none of these elaborately-constructed theories directly engages the concrete pressures facing today’s Santodomingueses. In that realm, the men and women Gutmann quotes speak much better for them-

selves. And secondly, although the theories themselves address issues of change, the book itself doesn't discuss that issue in any substantive or concretely contextualized way. For example, Gutmann insists early on that "by talking to and being with fathers and mothers, [he] learned to better distinguish between cultural customs that have been uncritically adopted from *the past* [my emphasis] and new ways of challenging these manners and habits that the men and women in Santo Domingo are creating every day" (pp. 50-51). However, in this book there is no specific past. As used, this term conveys some previous, all-encompassing, and unmentioned "before-today," be it twenty or even one hundred years before. He succeeds far better at situating his material when he discusses the two cultural divides that los Santodomingueses themselves use: urban-rural and rich-poor, the former touching on the continuing internal migration from *el campo* (the countryside or rural area) to DF. Yet even here, certain boundaries crucial to his story remain under-analyzed.

For example, Tomas, a metalworker, once told Gutmann that machismo still ran rampant in *los pueblos* (small towns). "'I'm serious!' he insisted and described what he thought was a typical situation in the countryside: a man riding [presumably a horse] an hour along a path, his wife walking alongside him struggling to keep up. 'You see it all the time *out there*,' he told me" (Ibid.; my emphasis). Unfortunately, Gutmann doesn't tease through these divides and the necessary role they play in enabling the residents of Santo Domingo to be non-machos and thus "modern." Instead, how los Santodomingueses position themselves as "modern" is only superficially and uncritically defined as the opposite of the backward "campo."

The book's most unsettling problem revolves around how he defines gender and the limitations that this definition imposes on how he "sees" the forms and spaces affecting the possibilities of men's and women's everyday lives. Gender, as the author defines it, is "the ways in which differences and similarities related to physical sexuality are understood, contested, organized and practiced by societies" (pp. 11-12).

While he does not automatically overlay the physical marking of Man and Woman with the socially-gendered beings of "man" and "woman," and does suggest that there is a "diversity of gendered meanings, institutions, and relations within and between different social groupings" (Ibid.), noticeably absent from this definition is the crucial issue of power. *Difference* is not the problem. The

problem lies in the ways in which power is assigned to, linked with, and mobilized in those differences. It's not enough to say, as Gutmann does, that gender(ed) differences, and their attendant practices, are continually contested. Rather, gender(ed) differences are contested specifically *because* those physical differences marked as significant, and the "men" and "women" they "produce," are differently infused with and attached to power, and hierarchized within each historical context and particular space. Without understanding that power is the problem—and not difference *per se*—we lose the very analytical punch and explanatory insights that a gender(ed) analysis can provide. Potentially lost—or at least limited—are the many ways and spaces in which we "see" gender-mobilized power operating.

This non-power-based definition of gender is made clear in "The Invasion of Santo Domingo," where Gutmann first describes Santo Domingo for his reader. In what could be taken as part of background information about the community, Gutmann talks about "the streets," what he calls the "the distinguishing public spaces in the *colonia*" (p. 42). Yet "the streets" are not all that Gutmann makes them out to be. Nowhere in his innocent description or later in his analysis of Santo Domingo does the author really address "the street" as a gendered space within the *colonia* or whom this space is "open" to and when: to everyone during the day but (primarily) to men at night (p. 42). As anyone who studies Mexico, even cosmopolitan Mexico City, knows, "the street" is not a neutral space. Nor, for that matter, is it neutral in the United States. Yet nowhere in his vivid description does Gutmann ever convey "the street" as a temporally-gendered space, which men, women, and children inhabit during the day but which functions differently after dark. After dark, those drinking and listening to loud music on Santo Domingo's street corners are generally men, not women. After dark "the street" is precisely the space where "decent women" don't go, that is, unless accompanied/"protected" by a man. While not all women observe—or can or have to observe—the "street's" rules, men and women still talk about its unwritten limitations. Yet Gutmann never touches on "the street" or anywhere else as a gendered space, and thus overlooks the power specifically associated with men's greater spatial and temporal access. By ignoring power as *central* to any definition of gender, he cannot see the spaces/ways in which that power is differently mobilized and expressed in people's lived experiences.

In another chapter, we again see what happens when Gutmann circumscribes gender to physical and social dif-

ferences. That chapter, entitled “Degendering Alcohol,” details the ways in which alcohol “is part of most people’s lives in one way or another in the *colonia*” (p. 175). He concludes that alcohol consumption has been “degendered” for two reasons: 1) “far more women today drink alcoholic beverages, and in greater quantities, than they did in the past” (Ibid.); and 2) because men and women drink together more now than previously. According to his definition, when “there is a decentering of the perceived wisdom that associated an activity [in this case, alcohol consumption] especially with men or women, [this process] has been degender[ed]\_” (p. 190).

Today, more women may—and do—drink in the company of men and in many social and family situations, some women drink as much as men. Still, can we really conclude that because the *cantina*, that bastion of male-bonding and intimacy, now allows women to grace its doors, that alcohol consumption is a degendered activity? This substantial argumentative leap Gutmann fails to support. Instead of looking merely at *who* engages in *which* activity, and how that changes, we need to explore how the meanings of these activities, engaged in by differently-gendered persons, are produced in the same and different contexts.

In conclusion, I wish that the author had stuck to what he does so well: illuminating for his readers the very complicated and textured lives of Santo Domingo’s

men and women. In the end, this book simultaneously provides insights into the lives of residents in one neighborhood in the world’s most populated urban area, and clouds those very insights with an overwhelming deference to theories and theorists, none of which helps us to understand the realities of the *colonia*’s dwellers. More importantly, Gutmann fails to push through his gendered analysis and tease out the linkages between power and the gender(ed) differences it creates. Still, in spite of the book’s flaws, I wholeheartedly congratulate Matthew Gutmann for putting “the macho” to rest. He has drawn out with much complexity the multiple masculinities in play in a *colonia* of Mexico City in the 1990s.

#### Note

[1]. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Vintage Press 1961); Evelyn P. Stevens, “Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America,” in Ann Pescetello, ed. *Female and Male in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 1973); David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1990).

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.Msu.Edu.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Deborah Cohen. Review of Gutmann, Matthew C., *The Meaning of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2229>

Copyright © 1998 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](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).