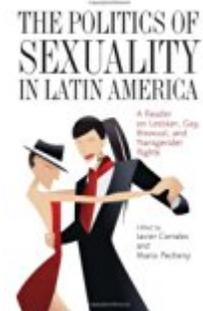


Javier Corrales, Mario Pecheny, eds.. *The Politics of Sexuality in Latin America: A Reader on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. xv + 454 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8229-6062-1.



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Published on H-Histsex (September, 2014)

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“We aren’t hiding anymore—it’s our rights that we’re fighting for,” exclaimed a participant at a July 2010 pro-same-sex marriage demonstration in Buenos Aires.[1] A few weeks later the Argentine Senate voted to modify the country’s Civil Code to permit same-sex marriage. The landmark vote represented perhaps the most significant legislative victory for the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) movement in Latin America and made Argentina only the second country in the Western Hemisphere, after Canada, to legalize same-sex marriage. Recent developments like this one, along with the legalization of same-sex marriage in Brazil, Uruguay, and several Mexican states; the institution of civil unions in Colombia and Ecuador; and a flurry of legislative and judicial victories for the transgendered in places like Bolivia, Chile, Cuba, and Uruguay render *The Politics of Sexuality in Latin America* a particularly timely and, indeed, a pioneering contribution to the rapidly expanding literature on non-heteronormative sexualities in Latin America.

The volume’s focus on the politics of sexual identity sets it apart from the earlier literature by U.S.-based Latin Americanist scholars, which focused on the formation of sexual identity itself. Starting in the 1970s and continuing through the 1990s, anthropologists and sociologists began to study same-sex sexuality in Latin America, and historians and literary scholars soon added their voices. Work by anthropologists and sociologists emphasized the socially constructed nature of sexual identity, the relationship between gender norms and sexuality, and the tension between traditional understandings of sexuality and a transnational gay and lesbian culture imported from North America and Europe.[2] Historians, meanwhile, studied the evolution of Latin American sexualities since the colonial era (and before), as well as the appearance, beginning in the late nineteenth century, of communities of people who felt same-sex attraction.[3] Yet much of the research until the early 2000s revolved around issues of classification and identity among men. To what extent has the traditional “passive-active”

binary been challenged by a North Atlantic gay and lesbian model of homosexuality? How are cultural discourses about gender reproduced and challenged by those who fall outside the bounds of heteronormativity? To put it succinctly, the debate often boiled down to “Are they gay too?”

The present volume moves beyond these debates. With a few exceptions, the essays take for granted the existence of self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered subjects who are broadly similar to their counterparts in North America and Europe and explore how they have mobilized politically to demand equal citizenship rights in Latin America’s new democracies. At the same time, the volume highlights many of the specificities that distinguish LGBT politics in Latin America from those in the North Atlantic—for example, the growth of LGBT movements within the context of a remarkably effervescent civil society since the late 1970s, the active role of many Latin American states in fighting discrimination, and the relatively greater influence of a mobilized transgender/transvestite/transsexual community on the LGBT political agenda.

While much of the earlier literature focused on homosexual men, this volume is noteworthy for the prominence accorded lesbians and transgendered people, a reflection of the editors’ commitment to topical, regional, and disciplinary inclusivity. Indeed, the volume contains chapters on Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. The twenty-seven academic contributors come from political science (ten); anthropology (five); literature (three); history, law, and public policy (two each); and geography, social sciences, and sociology (one each). Over half the contributions are by Latin Americans, nearly a third have not been previously published, and an additional seven appear here in English for the first time.

The editors, Javier Corrales and Mario Pecheny, point out in their introduction that their disci-

pline, political science, has been slow to examine LGBT political mobilization. Yet this does not mean that the LGBT movement has been insignificant in Latin America; rather, they insist that the study of “LGBT politics offers different and sometimes new insights about the democratization process” (p. 2). They argue that the volume reveals that the LGBT movement has dramatically advanced, if unevenly, over the last decade, but that its victories have come primarily at the political and policymaking levels, while homophobia remains widespread in everyday life. While the persistence of deep-seated homophobia has certainly limited the progress of the LGBT movement, as the editors note, it also makes the movement’s significant political gains all the more remarkable.

The volume effectively demonstrates that in addition to the usual difficulties confronting LGBT political organization everywhere—homophobia, the availability of the closet, the fact that LGBT is not a readily identifiable or visible social category—the LGBT movement in Latin America faces special challenges, including widespread poverty (which the editors consider a brake on identity politics), the influence of the Catholic Church and evangelical Protestantism, and the lingering ambivalence among parts of the Latin American Left about identity politics. Although Corrales and Pecheny feel that these factors have limited the inroads that Latin American LGBT movements have made, it is surely significant that the victories of the movement have come more quickly, with more active state intervention, and with less social upheaval than in the United States, for example.

The volume is divided into six sections. The first section, “Nation-Building and Heteronormativity,” seems somewhat out of place in a volume on contemporary LGBT political mobilization. Still, the essays on the policing of male same-sex sexuality in early twentieth-century Buenos Aires (Pablo Ben) and late nineteenth-century Cuban as-

simulation of U.S. discourses about homosexuality and effeminacy (Emilio Bejel) do provide examples of how Latin American states and intellectual elites have historically addressed non-heteronormative discourses and behaviors.

The second section, “Sexuality-Based Political Struggles,” focuses largely on LGBT political organizations, with an emphasis on the internal divisions within the movement over its goals and strategies. Pieces by James Green (Brazil), Stephen Brown (Argentina), Adriana Vianna and Sérgio Carrara (Brazil) and Millie Thayer (Costa Rica and Nicaragua) trace the growth of these small, largely middle-class groups and highlight broadly similar questions. Should the movement pursue an assimilationist strategy that attempts to incorporate LGBT desire into a heteronormative framework? Or should it adopt a civil rights-based one that utilizes a democratic/human rights discourse? Or should it choose a “radical” approach that seeks to subvert heteronormativity? Contributors to this section explore how the arguments employed by LGBT activists have changed since the appearance of the first LGBT groups in the 1970s, particularly since the advent of democratization in the 1980s, as well as how local and national specificities and the political and ideological orientations of individual activists have shaped LGBT organizing.

In the third section, “LGBT Movements’ Relations with Political Parties and Legislators,” the focus shifts to the attempts of Latin American LGBT organizations to influence parties and policy, particularly through calling for antidiscrimination provisions in constitutions and government recognition of same-sex relationships. An outstanding essay by Rafael de la Dehesa contrasts the electoral strategies of LGBT organizations in Mexico and Brazil in 1982 and explores the transnational links that activists in both countries formed with their counterparts abroad. A recurring theme in this section is the sometimes strained relationship of the LGBT movement with the Left, particularly in Brazil, where activists

have sought allies from across the political spectrum, not only in leftist parties, and Venezuela and Ecuador, where LGBT activists have had difficulty convincing leftist governments to codify protections for LGBT citizens in new constitutions.

Part 4, “The State and Public Policies,” emphasizes states’ policy responses to LGBT demands. Several of the authors (Eduardo Gómez, Roger Raupp Rios, and Tim Frasca) emphasize the policies adopted to address the HIV/AIDS crisis. And the translated transcript of a speech by Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to a 2008 national LGBT conference and interview with Mariela Castro, director of Cuba’s National Center for Sex Education and daughter of Raúl Castro and niece of Fidel Castro, merit special attention for their value as primary sources on state attitudes toward LGBT concerns.

In the less-focused fifth section, “Intrasociety Relations,” the contributors focus, broadly speaking, on the relationship between LGBT citizens and the societies and cultures in which they live. It includes pieces on Cuban oppression of gay men (Scott Larson and Rafael Ocasio), human rights and/or hate crimes (Andrew Reding and Camila Zabala Peroni), and media depictions of transgendered individuals in Argentina (Alejandro Modarelli). It also contains an intriguing chapter by Elisabeth Jay Friedman on Latin American lesbian-oriented websites, which explores the opportunities and challenges afforded by on-line organizing and community building.

Finally, the sixth section, “Diversities Within,” is the most pathbreaking. It addresses the competing goals and interests that coexist, often uncomfortably, within the LGBT movement. Lesbians sometimes feel that gay men are conditioned by a patriarchal, *machista* society to marginalize women and thus remain unsympathetic to their interests (Yuderkys Espinosa Mifioso). The transgendered, transvestites, and transsexuals complain that gay men and lesbians focus too heavily on civil rights like marriage and antidiscrimination

measures and de-emphasize police brutality and class-based issues. Meanwhile, gay men and lesbians sometimes appear embarrassed by the association of transvestites and the transgendered with lower socioeconomic status and prostitution, and gay men are uncomfortable with their rejection of norms of “masculine” behavior (Héctor Núñez González, Josefina Fernández, and Isadora Lins Franca). And an ideological gulf also can exist between the organizers of LGBT events like pride parades and participants on the street, as explored in the outstanding essay by Aluminé Moreno.

The volume contains a number of outstanding, theoretically sophisticated, and empirically rigorous studies alongside several brief, more journalistic accounts that address an entire country or even region in a cursory manner. Unfortunately, in the interest of providing a broad range of regional and disciplinary perspectives in a limited number of pages, many of the previously published pieces have been heavily edited and abridged—in some cases to the extent that the argument becomes difficult to follow.

The Politics of Sexuality in Latin America represents a trailblazing contribution to the study of same-sex sexuality in Latin America. Its move beyond questions of sexual identity to the politicization of that identity, disciplinary and regional breadth, attempts to include studies of lesbians and the transgendered, and publication of primary sources by activists and politicians ensure that a wide audience—scholars, graduate students, and undergraduates from across the humanities and social sciences, as well as law and public policy—will find it useful. Several of the chapters would work well in graduate seminars, while more general pieces, as well as those by activists and politicians, will prove invaluable in undergraduate courses.

Notes

[1]. Nahuel Lag, “Hicieron ruido por la igualdad,”

Página 12, July 14, 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/subnotas/149461-47987-2010-07-14.html>.

[2]. For a few representative examples, see Joseph Carrier, *De Los Otros: Intimacy and Homosexuality among Mexican Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Roger N. Lancaster, *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Richard G. Parker, *Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality, and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Annick Prieur, *Mema's House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[3]. See, for example, James N. Green, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Richard C. Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Peter Sigal, ed., *Infamous Desire: Male Homosexuality in Colonial Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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Citation: Bryan Pitts. Review of Corrales, Javier; Pecheny, Mario, eds. *The Politics of Sexuality in Latin America: A Reader on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. September, 2014.

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