

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Sixth Annual Latin American Labor History Conference

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The Sixth Annual Latin American Labor History Conference, organized at Yale University in New Haven around the central theme of “Proletarianization in Latin America,” produced a heterogeneous group of papers, each pursuing a different direction. Differences in object and method, perhaps, betrayed the tentativeness and absence of epistemological unity which have characterized the field since its inception. Yet, at the close of the conference, the generally shared feeling was one of accomplishment, given the wide range of historiographical problems raised by discussion of such little-explored themes as youth, discipline, gender, and health. Apart from semantic and often theoretical inconsistencies, variations in sources, time frame, and geographical setting underscored the immensity of the research agenda facing those historians of Latin American labor who have adopted a much-needed regional perspective. They also exposed the conceptual uncertainty of a necessarily comparative field which has yet to invent its proper paradigmatic points of reference.

Jonathan Brown of the University of Texas at Austin, a scholar of nineteenth-century Argentina who has turned his attention to Mexico, opened the conference with a broad, controversial treatment of the frictions pitting native-born against foreign-born skilled workers in American-owned capitalist ventures: “Proletarianization in Foreign-Owned Industrial Enterprises of Porfirian Mexico.” Skilled workers in Mexico, according to Brown, did not resist proletarianization or capitalist expansion as much as they resented the cultural imperialism and higher standards of living offered their privileged American-born colleagues. Hence the strikes, agitation, and sabotage inflicted by labor upon the interests of foreign capital during the Porfiriato should not be interpreted as a rejection of capitalism or capitalists, much less as a denial of the progress and mobility made possible by foreign investment, but as a conservative reaction of Mexican skilled workers and government alike to the prerogatives enjoyed by foreign workers and owners and to the pressures on wages and employment created by the proletarianization of the unskilled. As a result of this convergence between skilled labor and the pre-revolutionary Mexican government, U.S. capital was deprived of a free hand in widely dislocating Mexican traditional society in order to develop an “efficient, dependent, cheap, servile” workforce.

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John French of Florida International University placed Brown's analysis within an impoverished revisionist tradition of Mexican labor historiography inaugurated by Rodney Anderson in the 1970s, which asserts the predominance, in the prerevolutionary period, of a pragmatic, privileged, and decidedly reformist proletariat inclined to cooperate with the state. French rejected the vagueness of such broad national syntheses and stressed the need for regional and local studies which restore the experiences of ordinary workers, at all levels of production and with varying degrees of dependency on wage labor. He firmly rejected Brown's suggestion that capitalism in Mexico was strictly a foreign imposition, and argued for a more complex understanding of nationalism as a recourse which, by eroding "caste divisions" in the labor force, lends legitimacy to broad-based working-class struggles rather than, as Brown suggested, a simple assertion of cultural pride. Several discussants warned against non-empirical speculations regarding class consciousness and questioned the value of studying skilled laborers without addressing the work force as a whole.

Argentine historian Ricardo Salvatore of the National University of Córdoba delivered a paper entitled "Peons, Soldiers and Deserters: Military Recruitment and Proletarianization in Buenos Aires Province, 1829–1852." He argued that under the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas, compulsory service in the army played a significant disciplinary role in the proletarianization of gauchos, the consolidation of private estates, and the expansion of the export sector. Salvatore examined the limits of this strategy and highlighted the multiple forms of resistance to militarization, from temporary wage labor to flight and theft. Failing to fully subdue gaucho labor power, Rosas' reliance on military discipline tended instead to alienate gauchos from the rest of society, creating "a sense of social injustice which strengthened horizontal solidarities and helped to shape their class, as well as political, religious and ethnic, identity." In the ensuing discussion, Salvatore argued that it is no longer possible to apply a strict "primitive accumulation model" to the study of proletarianization. Mirta Lobato of the University of Buenos Aires commented that the army played a similar role in recruiting an indigenous labor force in the northern Chaco region. Although participants generally approved of Salvatore's emphasis on coercive labor discipline, Jeff Gould of Indiana University raised questions about the role of the market in shaping the labor force, as well as the extent to which the lifestyle of the gauchos may have shaped the character of the market itself. Anton Rosenthal of the University of Minnesota criticized both Brown and Salvatore for their lack of interest in the ideology of work and evolving perceptions by the workers themselves of the societal changes incurred by the proletarianization process.

Two papers specifically addressed issues of gender in Latin American labor historiography. Mirta Lobato's "Work and Women: Female Participation in the Meat Packing Industry of Buenos Aires, the Case of the Armour Frigorífico Workers, 1915–1969" sketched a complex and diverse picture of the labor process as experienced at the shop-floor level by both sexes, emphasizing the negative

repercussions of transitory and low-paid female employment and the role assigned to women by the division of labor on the formation of durable class-based trade unions. She also unveiled the ways in which family arrangements and community networks were constructed to prevent marriage and maternity from drawing women out of the factory for extended periods. Theresa Veccia of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, in her “Women, Work, and Family Life: São Paulo Textile Workers, 1900–1950,” corroborated Lobato’s contention that women were not torn between work and family life as an outcome of industrialization but adapted their work strategies to compensate for wage discrimination and limited access to upward mobility in the formal sector. Both speakers lamented the difficulty in obtaining adequate sets of records for a comprehensive factory study, and both had recourse to oral history, a relatively novel approach in the field of Latin American labor history.

Daniel James of Yale University stressed the need to grasp the complexity and ambiguity of women’s attitudes toward industrial work, the family and the union, and the interaction of these experiences in the changing consciousness of working class women—an analysis which would require greater reliance on carefully contextualized oral testimony. Barbara Weinstein of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, commenting on Veccia’s paper, suggested that further inquiry be made into the issue of skill as an ideological construction, and that the gender division of labor be linked in Brazil to the issue of child labor. Noting that both men and women in the textile industry earned less than a subsistence wage, she suggested that the cultural and sexual determinants justifying male domination or control may equal in importance the economic division of labor. Beyond economic needs and ideological constructions of gender, Peter Winn of Tufts University argued for the centrality of the issue of child care in understanding women’s strategies and possibilities for employment, a question which Mirta Lobato began to address in her paper. Michael Jimenez of Princeton University stressed the importance of the culture of the workplace in creating patterns of continuity in the gender division of labor.

Anton Rosenthal, in an analysis entitled “Death on the Line: Disease, Accidents, and Worker Consciousness on the Railroads of Ecuador,” attributed the precarious existence of rail workers to conscious decisions made by transport capital regarding the organization of work. By extending their demands beyond the issue of wages and mobilizing around themes of working-class dignity and inhumane health policies, Ecuadorean railroad workers were able to rally the support of other working-class sectors and exercise positions of leadership in the labor movement. Ronn Pineo of Towson State University questioned Rosenthal’s minimizing of wage issues as a crucial motive for strikes and argued that, despite the enormous death rate among railroad workers, they were an advantaged group by Ecuadorean standards. The Quito-Guayaquil railroad network was a financial disaster and played little part in the cacao export industry, leading Pineo to question the choice of railroad workers as a meaningful case study of Ecuadorean

work conditions and labor militancy. Michael Jimenez, James, and Winn applauded Rosenthal's emphasis on disease and accidents but underscored the need for a deeper analysis of the relationship of health to the community, of the political culture on the railroads, and of language as a reflection of how railroad workers perceived the danger inherent in their lives. Emilia Viotti da Costa of Yale University suggested that greater attention be paid to the ecological and environmental context of railroad work in Ecuador, as well as to widespread theft, labor indiscipline, and denial of the railroad's legitimacy among rural communities.

Deborah Levenson of Columbia University ended the conference with a contemporary analysis of "Street Gangs in Guatemala City." These *maras* are organized groups of literate, unemployed working- and lower-middle-class youths who survive through theft and participation in the informal economy, developing a nonconformist, alternative group culture and incipient class consciousness amidst the turmoil and dislocation of Guatemalan urban society. Discussants debated the structural and societal causes of the 'mara' phenomenon; some, such as Jimenez and Viotti da Costa, drew parallels with gang phenomena elsewhere in Latin America and capitalist Europe. Winn suggested that the key issue in Levenson's paper was not survival but empowerment and transcendence, noting that the 'maras' are not street children or shantytown dwellers, but educated young who have defined, in the face of frustrated expectations, their own terms of status and social mobility. Participants were unanimous on the need for further inquiry into issues of youth, informal organization, and urban dislocation in violent, economically and socially devastated urban settings throughout Latin America.