Dore (2000) One Step Forward, Two Steps Back - Gender and the State in the Long Nineteenth Century

Dore, E.


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In "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Gender and the State in the Long Nineteenth Century," Elizabeth Dore sets out to reexamine and interpret how state politics and gender relations affected and conditioned one another throughout the 19th century (also called the 'long century,' or the extended period of transitional development in Latin America from the late colonial period to the more modern 20th and 21st centuries).

Dore first addresses the generally accepted view of most Latin American historians: that "... the long nineteenth century [was] an era in which the state gradually dismantled major structural inequalities in gender relations" (Dore 2000:4). The main two subjects of examination through which this conclusion has been reached are the questions of property law and secularization in Latin America. However, whereas most historians stress the increasing participation of women in the public domain and the "emancipatory effects of secularization," Dore contends that state policies throughout Latin America resulted in more negative than positive outcomes for women—that the general direction of the long 19th century was regressive, not progressive (Dore 2000:5).

To supplant this argument, Dore divides her argument into six parts. The first, entitled "Understanding the State," addresses how to study the state in the context of Latin America characteristics and history. The three questions that need to be answered according to the author are What is the state? Why does it exist? and How does it rule? (Dore 2000:6). The answers are what one would typically expect of state structure behavior: states rule in favor of the elites through the consent and general interest of the masses. The primary objective of the state is to allow the upper classes to extract the resources needed to maintain their power positions from the lower classes in the forms of labor, capital, etc. Dore also addresses the interconnectedness of the state and gender as a result of these constructed political frameworks, noting that "... states frequently take the lead in transforming social relations, consciousness, and culture more generally," and that "]they establish a quasi-official gender regime by regulating as many aspects of life as they can reach..." (Dore 2000:8). The shift from colonial divine right justifications of power to more liberal patriarchalism in the nineteenth century was fueled by these capabilities of the state.

The second section, "Late Colony: the Myth of Women without Rights," contradicts the widely-held conception that colonial Latin American women were devoid of juridical personhood (legal status). In fact, as Dore emphasizes: "[o]ne of the salient ways in which the late colonial state in Latin America constructed gender was to guarantee to women property rights and an equal share of their family's fortune" (Dore 2000:12).

In the third section, Dore outlines the changes brought about as a result of the "Exclusionary Republics." She argues that after independence was reached in Latin American countries, there was a feeling of unrest among men due to the expanding levels of participation of women in the wars and the changes in population composition (women outnumbered in post-war society due to the deaths of male soldiers) that led to a movement of men urging women to return to the sphere of domesticity. The important point to take away from this is that republican leaders attempted to reign in stability through the naturalization of patriarchalism (Dore 2000:16).

Part four, "Gendered Liberalism," addresses the major points of land privatization and societal secularization in these liberal post-colonial republics of Latin America. Dore argues that the rise of private property actually slowed the development of capitalist practices in many countries, as this 'landedness' limited the liberalist-capitalist goal of increasing exports. (Dore 2000:17-18). In this section, Dore also expresses the important point that the category of 'women' does not differentiate according to factors like status, race, class, or ethnicity, yet law in these republics often did recognize these differences implicitly in their structures (Dore 2000:20).

"Secularization of Marriage," part five, continues and elaborates upon the discussion of secularization introduced in the preceding section in the specific context of marriage. Dore argues that the change from clerical to state-led regulation of marriage buttressed patriarchal authority over wives in marriages (Dore 2000:22).

Overall, I think that Dore presents a well-reasoned argument. She recognizes the inherent contradictions and flaws in her evidence (such as the recognition of the fact that the myth of colonial women without rights does hold some truths [see Dore 2000:12]), which are only natural to anthropological research. She presents a well-organized and divided piece that relates all of the parts to her main point: that conceptions of 19th Latin American states as being crucial to the advancement of women need to be challenged, and that while certain advances were made, ultimately this period resulted in a regression for the position of women in political structures. That is to say, there was 'one step forward, and two steps back.'

Additionally, on a personal note, this article was particularly interesting to me in that I could associate and make connections to what I’ve learned in other Latin American history and political science classes (and frankly, it was a bit surprising that I could make those associations, but cool nonetheless). A brief example??