Caulfield (2001) The History of Gender in the Historiography of Latin America

Caulfield, Sueann


Caulfield 2002 Gender in Historiography of Latin America.pdf

Caulfield provides a comprehensive view of the evolution of gender studies in both Latin America and the U.S. (often comparing the two), citing several authors who have made significant contributions in the field. Her main point (at least in the beginning of the work) however seems to be that Latin American scholars have been much more hesitant to analyze gender in the way that they have analyzed other social classifiers such as class, ethnicity, etc. She specifically points to a lack of the use of the word "gender" in Latin American discourse (although she notes that this trend has changed recently), implying a view that women's studies and gender studies exist separately. This also points to a lack of discourse on specific studies of masculinity. Caulfield refers to Mary Kay Vaughan's study in supporting her notions of the dichotomies between Latin American and U.S. gender studies, noting a problematic lack of connection between scholars of the two.

Caulfield organizes her study by chronologizing the history of political and scholarly trends into three overlapping periods, viewing the "genesis" (so to speak) of women's studies in Latin America to have taken place in the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s (Caulfield 2001:452). She notes that the ramifications of these initial studies influenced the discourse on them for decades to come. Joan Scott and the 1980s introduced analysis of gender as opposed to analysis of just women. Caulfield refers to such analysis as "cutting edge" in the 1990s (Caulfield 2001:457). John French and Daniel James presented a new slant on women's studies, attempting to identify the causes of oppression towards women. They noted citing in particular a "passionate partisanship" in studies with Marxist underpinnings which explored the relationship between capitalism, and patriarchy and the oppression of women.

As study progressed, Caulfield notes that a "renewed interest in colonial history" (and the roles of women within this history) developed, as well as the study of women within the historical context of the family. Throughout the study, she presents different views of the role of family in shaping women's identities, corresponding to differing locations and norms of the times--such as the prominence or absence of a hierarchical patriarchal system. She also goes into the history and study of slaves and how gender roles functioned within the slave society, often using the slave family as a basis for her analysis. She indicates the importance of religion in Latin America as well, and how it informed many studies, helping to shape the roles of men and women along with the traditional family roles. A tendency for emphasis on the domesticity of the female was apparent. The importance of honor, or perceived honor (particularly in regards to the study of gender among the elite, and in a family-based context), informed many gendered identities in several of the studies and works Caulfield discussed as well.

The interaction of race and class with gender took on a significance in many studies, despite the fact that these factors were considered to be independent variables (Caulfield 2001:458). The importance of race and class also varied among nations. The variance among women's actions in relation to these factors is given a full overview by June Nash and Helen Safa in their work. A significant factor in the incorporation of gender studies into social and political spheres was the adoption of such study by historians in the early 1980s, introducing an alternative to the more traditional scholars of gender--political scientists, anthropologists and sociologists (Caulfield 2001:459). Caulfield also notes another change in the early 1980s, that of greater collaborations among U.S. and Latin American scholars of gender. She goes on to explain that a more nationalized (as opposed to internationalized) focus among Latin American scholars may be the reason that their work on gender received less exposure initially. She repeatedly speaks of the different types of documents used to inform studies of gender, often wide-ranging in their scope or function.

Various studies of development, such as that of Heidi Tinsman, produced conclusive results of the effects of development on women's status--generally with reporting negative results for women. In relation to this, several of the studies mentioned by Caulfield also dealt with gender in the context of labor, and how the labor system enabled or oppressed workers based on gender.

Using the work of Steve Stern as support, Caulfield makes a point that resonates with the ideas of many of the works we have studied this semester--that while gender is constructed by society and the factors influencing it, it in turn is simultaneously constantly constructing these things as well. In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between societal norms and gender identity.

Caulfield's final pages focus on the meanings and significance of the notions of honor and hegemony (in extreme cases, resulting in a violent need to prove dominance) as they pertain to gender roles and identity. She introduces several studies, and goes more in-depth about their content than she had done with previous works.

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Vaughan, Mary Kay

French, John and Daniel James

Nash, June

Tinsman, Heidi

Stern, Steve