

The complicated terrain of Latin American
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Martin Austin Nesvig

Hispanic American Historical Review

Duke University Press

81:3-4, August-November 2001

pp. 689-729

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Hispanic American Historical Review 81.3-4 (2001) 689-729

[[Access article in PDF](#)]

The Complicated Terrain of Latin American Homosexuality

Martin Nesvig

This essay is both a historiographical review of male homosexuality in Latin America and a historical synthesis of the intellectual and cultural traditions of attitudes, mores, and laws regarding homosexuality.¹ The topic of male homosexuality is a powerful lens through which historians can address and problematize the dilemmas of reconstructing the social past.² Taken originally as a corrective against overly diplomatic and political history, the new social history of the 1970s still bears crucially on the subject of homosexuality because the available scholarship still struggles with the basic issues of reconstruction.

The history of homosexuality bears centrally on the nature of sexual relations, reproduction, marriage, and family, all central components of social values. [End Page 689] Unfortunately, the scarcity of extant sources and the nascent quality of its historiography render the study of homosexuality in Latin America difficult. Scholars of this subject wrestle quite consciously over the dilemma of "realistic reconstruction" of action as opposed to the study of collective representations. The lack of narratives by gay men, the issues of "filtration" of sources through those who wrote about the "objects" of crime and sin, and the overall scarcity of material contribute to this dilemma. As a result, the use of epistemology as a framework retains strong allure for many scholars working on Latin American homosexuality. Precisely because there is scant documentation of the actual social behavior and cultural worlds of homosexuals in Latin America, scholars have understandably been drawn to the theoretical models of gender and sexuality.

Two concerns are woven together into a strand of social, cultural, and intellectual history; in other words, homosexuality conjures the dilemma between behavior and proscription. On the one hand, there exist intellectual and cultural traditions of attitudes, mores, and laws regarding homosexuality. Taken in their broadest terms, Michel Vovelle defines this territory as both ideology and mentality. In this model, ideology represents the more formalized discussions that bear on a particular subject. Consequently, law, theology, military sanction, governmental policy, and propaganda constitute ideology. Mentalities are less definable, more fluid, and, as the famous *annaliste* historian Marc Bloch understood them, derive from collective representations.³ For our purposes here, mentality concerning homosexuality includes popular attitudes, social customs, response to Church teachings, reaction to law, as well as the beliefs, customs, and concerns of homosexual and bisexual men.

This essay is divided into several sections because the scholarship is fragmented along geographical and epochal boundaries: section 1 focuses on the Spanish colonial period, drawing on Mexican and Iberian theological and legal traditions to provide a fuller understanding of colonial attitudes toward homosexuality; section 2 offers a critical overview of the historiography of colonial Brazil; the third section is a speculative discussion of the period from roughly 1700 to 1870, a period marked by a near-complete absence of historiographic attention for the subject under review. Studies of the so-called period of modernization that followed showcase a growing body of scholarship on homosexuality. [End Page 690] For the most part, such work tends to show how attitudes toward homosexuality gained a positivist and psychiatric distinction. The essay concludes with a discussion of the works of anthropologists and sociologists, from 1940 to 2000.

The long-cherished assumptions of patriarchy and male-dominated sexuality have guided the historiography of homosexuality in Latin America. Two theoretical models inform this classification. First, the honor-shame paradigm of Latin American and Mediterranean society suggests that sexuality is a key component of the system of honor and shame. A classic formulation of this paradigm is Julian Pitt-Rivers's discussion of the sexual honor in the Mediterranean. Pitt-Rivers argues that penetration is the overriding metaphor for such honor; thus before marriage, a woman needed to be a virgin in order to protect her honor and man should not have been sexually penetrated.⁴ Numerous Latin Americanists who specialize in gender studies have shown that this system is indeed endemic to domestic and marital culture,⁵ but the problem for...

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I wish to thank several people who have read and commented on earlier drafts of this essay. Roger Caniff and Paul Vanderwood first encouraged me to pursue this subject and convinced me that such an undertaking might in time bear fruit. Cristina Rivera-Carza read the essay through as an M.A. thesis appendix and deserves praise for her patience. To Antônio Manoel Hoanhu I owe my meager understanding of Iberian law. I am also indebted to Joanne Ferrero, Donna Guy, Gilbert M. Joseph, and Stuart Schwartz for their valuable feedback.

1. There exist some good bibliographies for those seeking more comprehensive listings. See Daniel Baskin and Donna J. Guy, "Bibliography of Gender and Sexuality Studies on Latin America," in *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*, ed. Daniel Baskin and Donna J. Guy (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1997); Luis Mott, "A homosexualidade no Brasil: Bibliografia," in *Latin American Men and Minorities: Their Images and Realities*, Papers of the Thirtieth Annual Meeting of the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials, Princeton Univ., ed. Dan C. Hozen, 2 vols. (Madison: SALALM Secretariat, Univ. of Wisconsin, 1997); and Robert Howes, "Select Bibliography of Latin American Publications Dealing with Homosexuality," in *Latin American Men and Minorities*. Also, for a general introduction to this topic, the reader may consult the anthology *Latin American Male Homosexualities*, ed. Stephen O. Murray (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1995).

2. Michel Foucault, *Identities and Moralities*, trans. Eamon O'Hiberty (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

Hispanic American Historical Review 82:3-4
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