Teaching About Women and Underdevelopment in Latin American History

Julio César Pino
Kent State University, Kent, Ohio

LATIN AMERICA, the most advanced of the underdeveloped regions of the world, is a perfect showcase for exploring the contradictions that come into play when the historical construction of gender clashes with economic practice. The history of modern Latin America shows that economic development can actually work to the detriment of women. The most important obstacle to women's liberation in the region is social class, not the "glass ceiling" that is said to keep professional women out of corporate offices. It is the "sticky floor" that binds working-class women to a futile existence.[1] Twice at Kent State University, Ohio, first in 1996 and again in 1998, I have taught an upper division colloquium that asks students to contemplate the interconnection of gender and social class in shaping women's response to underdevelopment in Latin America. The participants were required to peruse oral testimonies dealing with women from Mexico, Central America, Brazil and Cuba collected by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists in order to grasp the role of women in capitalist and socialist societies.

The prevalence of "lifestyle" issues, from abortion to gay rights, in the discourse of American feminism tends to blur class lines in the United States when it comes to debating women's issues. Such is not the case in Latin America. The complete globalization of capital and the neoliberal

The History Teacher Volume 34 Number 3 May 2001

economic order adopted by regimes from the Rio Grande to Patagonia have widened the gap between the rich and poor and launched, among politically-active women of the region, a reinvestigation of the historical relationship between economic injustice and gender politics.[2] While many middle and upper class women have entered professional positions in significant numbers, this has not changed the overall social structure of Latin American society. Economic growth based on industry and services has enlarged the ranks of two classes that had remained embryonic before the twentieth century, but with differing consequences for women. The middle class grew through industrialization and the expansion of centralized government bureaucracies. Legal marriages became more common, in part to gain access to city services. Husbands and wives partook of cultural activities together in contrast to the segregation practiced in the countryside. The wife assumed greater independence within the household as a consequence of easier access to education and the entry of middle-class females into the urban work force.

The surge of industry after 1940 in the leading economies of the region—Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina—increased the numbers of women laboring in factories, but they frequently encountered prejudice from the media, the Church and employers who deemed them pathetic, incompetent creatures, incapable of doing full-time "masculine" industrial work.[3] In fact, most female migrants from the countryside plunged into a subproletariat composed of underpaid workers with only sporadic participation in the economy. Their usual occupations were domestic services (maids, laundresses, cooks) and street sales. Looser family arrangements were one result of this trend. The extended family that once offered nominal protection to women gradually vanished. Nuclear families came under siege from the political economy of the city. Employers valued workers for their capacity to shift from one job site to the next, weakening any sense of identification with the home.[4] The combination of transience of employment, rising inflation and male abandonment contributed to the growth of female-headed households inside the shantytowns of the great Latin American metropolises.[5]

Can the historical trajectory of Latin American women inform us, teachers and students, in some unique way about underdevelopment, the search for development through reform or revolution, and personal and political liberation? Economists usually equate development with an expansion of the productive forces by mobilizing land, labor, and capital to their fullest extent. Modernization has been defined by sociologists as the process of copying the economic stages of growth experienced by the advanced capitalist countries. Yet critics from the Third World see development and modernization as a series of steps leading to the formation of

a dependent capitalist economy, steps which, while promoting industrialization through close integration with the United States, still maintain the property relations of the past largely intact.[6] For many Latin American women the result of modernization has been the weakening of group ties based on social origin and the loss of the safety net provided by the family, combined with a growing estrangement from formal politics. I wanted my students to learn from first-hand sources the experience of working women struggling with the economic and political challenges of the twentieth century while they sought to shake off social roles mired in the colonial epoch.

My class is writing-intensive, with the final grade decided on the basis of five essay papers. I use Alfonso' Arau's film *Like Water for Chocolate* (1993), based on Laura Esquivel's best-selling novel, for our first paper and discussion. Arau and Esquivel, who wrote the screenplay, brilliantly illustrate how modernization in Mexico on the eve of the Revolution of 1910 posed a monumental challenge to traditional gender relations among the landed aristocracy, in this case a matriarch and her three daughters. Students write papers on the many "revolutions" going on simultaneously in the movie: Tita rebelling against the passive role inculcated in Mexican daughters by their mothers; Gertrudes seeking comfort in middle class marriage but always thwarted by fate; Rosaro jumping on horseback to ride off with a *guerrillero*, and coming back at the end of the film as a full general in the revolutionary army! Mexican women actively participated in the demise of the aristocracy, but the freedoms they won through the revolution depended on ethnicity (Creole or Mestizo), and occupation. More than a few students have elaborated on the fact that the family's Indian cook, representing the Mexican working class, is submissive and mostly silent throughout the film.

I, Rigoberta Menchú, the autobiography of the Nobel Peace Prize winner from Guatemala, is typically taught in Latin American courses as a primer on the horrendous events which occurred in that country following the United States-sponsored military coup of 1954 and the indigenous community's heroic battle for survival, but I have tried to get students to observe that the "peaceful" labor activities Indians perform for their Mestizo overlords can be equally detrimental in stripping away indigenous culture. Many of the women who take up political activity in Central America were born in rural indigenous communities, but if they are to work in the city they must assume a Mestiza identity by speaking Spanish and using modern dress, creating a case of split personality. Menchú herself contrasts female labor obligations in the Mayan village, plantation work on the Guatemalan Pacific coast, and doing maid service for the mestizo middle class of Guatemala City. Student papers based on

this book have tended to focus on how ethnicity in Guatemala warps perceptions of both social class and gender. Indigenous women are presumed to be fit for only the dirtiest forms of work, and are treated little better than the family dog. The debate over the authenticity of Menchú's account of her life should not deter instructors from assigning her autobiography; on the contrary, it can be the starting point for a discussion of how indigenous working-class women, traditionally silenced by history, should tell their story.[7]

Cuba after Fidel Castro's takeover in 1959 and Nicaragua under the Sandinista regime (1979-1990) provide ample opportunity to examine how women fare in the attempt to construct socialism.[8] Castro himself said in 1966, "If we were asked what the most revolutionary thing that the revolution is doing, we would answer that it is precisely this—the revolution that is occurring among the women of our country.[9] "*Four Women: Living the Revolution. An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (1977) by Oscar Lewis, Ruth Lewis and Susan Rigdon uses interviews conducted from the late 1960s to the early 1970s to examine female participation in the Cuban Revolution and the impact of socialism on family life, sexual relations, interracial unions and the place of women in the work force. The great advantage of this volume lies precisely in the intimacy of the answers provided by the four respondents: a middle-class woman deeply involved in the anti-Batista underground; a one-time nun, sexually-exploited by her male superior, who sought redemption through the revolution; a former prostitute who was "re-educated" and retrained for a vocation; and a daughter of the aristocracy, trying to reconcile her conservative upbringing with support for the Castro government. The essays I have asked student to write have focused on the positive economic and psychological transformations brought about by the 1959 revolution. The hardships in Cuba caused by the collapse of the Soviet camp, the introduction of some elements of a market economy, and the flourishing of prostitution have stalled the progress made by Cuban women, but *Four Women* may still be read with great profit. The students can debate, from a gender perspective, whether the Cuban government should salvage what is left of socialism or promote a transition towards a full capitalist economy.

The revolution of 1979 in Nicaragua, mounted against the dictatorship of Anastazio Somoza II, and led by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), has been the focus of gender and class analysis by academics, most sympathetic to the goals of the Sandinistas. Nicaragua under the Somoza dynasty featured (unusually for Central America) high levels of female employment and matrifocal households. Diane Walta Hart collected testimony from one family, the Lopézes, to produce *Thanks*

to God and the Revolution: The Oral History of a Nicaraguan Family (1990), which ranges from the 1960s and the first futile efforts to overthrow Somoza to the early 1980s and the economic crisis that plagued the Sandinista regime while it fought the United States, backed counterrevolutionaries (*Contras*). Hart emphasizes how the initial zeal in favor of the FSLN, especially on the part of women, gave way to growing disillusionment once the country began experiencing astronomical inflation and the inevitable explosion of an underground economy. Hart's most extensive interviews are devoted to two family members whose lives are turned upside down by the revolution. Leticia Lopéz, is a Sandinista militant who balances politics, religious duties to her Christian Base Community (CEB), and a precarious marriage, all the while hustling on the black market to feed her four daughters. Her younger brother Omar, a combatant in the war against the Contras, gradually becomes mentally unbalanced, not only because of the pressures of war but also, Hart hints, due to the reshuffling of gender roles inside the household. He, the *macho*, has let the family down while his mother and sisters assume greater political and economic self sufficiency. Student essays based on this book have focused on how far the Sandinistas succeeded in building a society free of class exploitation and gender inequality. Writing in 1990, Hart gave a qualified endorsement to the FSLN in this regard, while noting that the Front had yet to confront its own internal problems with gender discrimination. The aftermath of Violeta Chamorro's election that year, and the subsequent rise to power of president Miguel Aleman, brought with it a dismantling of many Sandinista-inspired projects including female economic cooperatives and child care centers. Consequently, the instructor utilizing the book today may wish to compare it with recent writings on Nicaragua which document the impact of neoliberal economic policies on women.[10]

The disappointing experience with male-dominated revolutionary parties has driven many working women in Latin America to seek participation in social movements which seek to reform rather than overthrow the state—shantytown residents' associations, communal kitchens, human rights groups, and consumer organizations. This political reorientation is evident in *Women in Brazil* (1993), a collection of biographies, manifestos, songs, and poems composed by Brazilians but edited by a German feminist; and in *Brazilian Women Speak* (1993), based on interviews conducted by American women studies professor Daphne Patai. Both volumes make the case for a more inclusive women's movement that takes into account how underdevelopment rearranges and distorts the meaning of categories taken for granted by First World feminists. A white middle-class woman in Brazil has more in common politically with

her counterpart in the United States than with a Brazilian laborer. A black domestic servant in Brazil regards class status to be more important than either race or gender in shaping her politics. For this assignment, I ask students to imagine they are delegates to a United Nations conference on women and are called upon to write a report on "The Condition of Women in Brazil." The essays are to be written in the form of "interviews" with the women featured in *Women in Brazil* and the Patai book. They should ask what advantages, if any, did working women derive from the "Brazilian economic miracle" of the 1960s and 1970s, when the country's economic growth rates were the envy of the Third World? Why are so many Afro-Brazilian women found in the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo? Has organized religion, either Roman Catholicism or Protestant Evangelism, had any positive impact on women's chances for social mobility? Most students chose to highlight the victimization of Brazilian women, but others have noted how fast feminist politics spread in the 1970s, launching an unexpected challenge to the military dictatorship installed in 1964.

The major challenge I have faced in preparing the class to write their essays has been confronting the stereotypes that students brought with them concerning gender in Latin America. Too many Americans *think* they know all about how females and males are supposed to behave south of the United States border with Mexico. American-made movies, television news and popular magazines all portray a land filled with aggressive *machos* addicted to a cult of virility and patient *Marias*—the humble females who dedicate themselves to the spiritual and moral sphere of life, sacrificing everything for the family.[11] I have tried to get students to reflect on the socio-economic roots of such behavior, and why women of the lower classes are particularly at risk from both physical violence and sexual discrimination. These are: the prevalence in many countries of an agro-export economy with few jobs for women; the low-levels of industrialization which consign many urban women to housework; the high illiteracy rates, especially in the countryside; and the denial of political rights by authoritarian regimes. Few of my students, raised in middle class America, are comfortable with the idea that economic growth can come at the expense of women, a theme pursued in Third World feminist literature but not by the American press.[12]

My class has normally attracted a dozen students, with a minority of females. This is typical of the other Latin American courses I have taught at Kent State, but it has made the discussions less interesting than might have been the case with a more even gender distribution. Nevertheless, reaction to the readings has been contentious and often startling. An older male student, obviously well-read, was bothered by the way political

activity seemed to dominate the life of Rigoberta Menchú."She is what (philosopher) Eric Hoffer called the true believer, someone who sacrifices every personal concern—marriage, work, pleasure—to politics," he protested. I pointed out that what might appear aberrant political behavior in the United States could be termed a normal response to injustice in Latin America, but the students were not impressed. One female student objected that *Women in Brazil,* edited by a self-described "feminist collective" dealt exclusively with the lives of women organizing against male employers, implying that all Brazilian women share the same political outlook, an impression belied by *Brazilian Women Speak,* in which women from different social backgrounds, including the wealthy, expressed a variety of opinions on how to overcome discrimination. This was, of course, the point I had in mind in creating this course; all our readings demonstrated that "feminism" does not belong to any particular social group or political party. The women's movement, like everything else in Latin American society, is part of the political terrain contested between social classes. What lessons might this hold for young North American women and men confronting gender and racial inequality in their own society?

Class Readings

Burgos, Elisabeth. ed. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala.* New York: Verso. 1984.

Caipora Women's Group, eds. *Women in Brazil.* London: Latin American Bureau, Ltd.,1993. (Distributed in the United States by Monthly Review Press.)

Hart, Diane Walta. *Thanks to God and the Revolution: The Oral History of a Nicaraguan Family.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.

Lewis, Oscar and Ruth M. Lewis and Susan Rigdon. *Four Women: Living the Revolution. An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba.* Urbana, Ill.:University of Illinois Press, 1977.

Patai, Daphne. *Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Notes

1. An overview of the connection between gender, class, and politics in Latin American can be found in Francesca Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice*(Hanover, NH.: University Press of New England, 1991); Elizabeth Dore, ed., *Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997); Lynn Stephen, *Women and Social Movements in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); Christine E. Bose and Edna Acosta-Belén, eds., *Women in the Latin American Development Process* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

2. See, for example, Amrita Basu, ed., *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1995), Part 3, "Latin America."

3. For Brazil see Barbara Weinstein, "Unskilled Worker, Skilled Housewife: Constructing the Working-Class Woman in São Paulo, Brazil", in John D. French and Daniel James (eds.), *The Gendered World of Latin American Women Workers,* Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1997), 72-99.

4. Elizabeth Elin, ed. *Family, Household and Gender Relations in Latin America* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1991).

5. Alan Gilbert, *The Latin American City* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1994).

6. See Dave Broad, "Globalization and the Casual Work Problem: History and Prospects", *Social Justice* 22, No.3 (1995):67-91.

7. Jo-Marie Burt and Fred Rosen, "Truth -Telling and Memory in Postwar Guatemala: An Interview with Rigoberta Menchú," North American Congress on Latin America, *Report on the Americas* 32, No.5 (March/April 1999): 6-10.

8. Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage: The Failure of 20th Century Revolutions to Develop A Feminist Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992).

9. Elizabeth Stone, ed., *Women and the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1981), 48.

10. Florence E. Babb, "After the Revolution: Neoliberal Policy and Gender in Nicaragua," *Latin American Perspectives* Issue 88, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Winter 1996): 27-48.

11. For a typical story from the American media see *U.S. News and World Report,* "Battered by the Myth of Machismo" (April 4, 1994): 40.

12. See Lourdes Benería, ed., *Women and Development: The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies* (New York: Praeger, 1982) and I.Tinker, ed., *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).