

## Culture



# June E. HAHNER, *Emancipating the Female Sex: The Struggle for Women's Rights in Brazil, 1850-1940*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990, 301 pages, paper

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urban has unravelled to some extent because of migration and commuters, with many lamenting the collapse of "community" into something resembling a pastiche of competing interest groups. This "grounding" of rural life with a dollop of "harsh" reality not only makes for fascinating reading, it also serves to remind readers that similar patterns may lurk beyond the sometimes idyllic façade of traditional communities associated with anthropologists.

As a lapsed anthropologist (I received all my degrees in Anthropology and Maori Studies, but my current devotion is sociological), I was both reassured yet surprised by Barrett's ethnography: Reassured, because of the conventionality of his enterprise; surprised, because of his reliance on an anthropologist-centred narrative, with its reluctance (which Barrett duly acknowledges) to move over and make space for the voices of others. In other words, those who hope to find something different in terms of ethnographic discourse may be disappointed. For those looking to find a well crafted ethnography of a community in transition, this book should rank near the top of any list. That alone suggests this theoretically-informed ethnographic work will further bolster the fortunes of the *Anthropological Horizons* series under the auspices of the University of Toronto. Whether it is destined to become a Canadian classic remains to be seen.

June E. HAHNER, *Emancipating the Female Sex: The Struggle for Women's Rights in Brazil, 1850-1940*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990, 301 pages, paper.

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Now available in a paperback edition, historian June Hahner's *Emancipating the Female Sex: The Struggle for Women's Rights in Brazil, 1850-1940* is likely to become a much used text in courses on Latin American women, on women's history, and on feminist movements internationally. For those adventurous enough to venture outside disciplinary, geographical, and topical boundaries, however, the book promises to challenge other (and at times, its own) simplistic and ahistorical formulations and to expand social science perspectives on a variety of topics. These include: family forms and

ideologies; women's roles and experiences; gender stereotypes; the impacts of modernization and development on women, on class composition and relations, and on cultural behaviors, values, and diversity. Based primarily on archival research in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the book might be better subtitled "the struggle for elite and middle class women's rights in southern Brazil," although Hahner does, at times, raise significant issues relating to working class women in Brazil.

Hahner sets out to explore the history and development of feminism or organized women's rights movements in Brazil; according to the author, these are movements composed of opponents of gender inequality and those seeking to end this inequality. With this aim, Hahner begins with a discussion of the class and racial dimensions of women and society in the mid-nineteenth century. From there, she turns to a discussion of the changing social, economic, and political context of the late nineteenth-century in which female pioneers for women's rights began to develop their own press and address a variety of issues including education, abolition, employment, and suffrage. Following a discussion of the different roles and experiences of upper and middle class women as compared to lower class women, Hahner explores the suffrage movement, a particularly middle and upper class woman's concern, at the beginning of the twentieth century. She concludes her book with an examination of the continuities and contrasts of women's movements in Brazil from the 1970s on. The appendices provide several rich examples of women's writing from the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Hahner's discussion in Chapter Three of "contrasting women's worlds in the early twentieth century" is perhaps the most anthropologically relevant and exciting chapter in the book. Here Hahner contrasts the diverging economic and gender roles, ideologies, and concerns of primarily urban, upper and middle class women with those of lower class women. In relation to recent work on women and development (particularly studies of the impact of industrialization and modernization on women), the growth of the informal sector, and on contemporary changes in gender and familial roles and ideologies, several points raised in this chapter bear reiterating. One simple but often neglected point is that working class women have usually worked and that gender stereotypes and ideologies – such as *marianismo* in Latin

America –are not always applied equally across class, racial, ethnic, or regional boundaries. Hahner, in fact, provides a brief but absorbing discussion of the process whereby, in the early twentieth century, the elite and middle class restrictions on women, subsumed within the concept of *marianismo*, began to breakdown for upper class women at the same time as the political and economic elite in conjunction with male leaders of the growing labor movement began to apply this gender ideology to working class women. The extension of *marianismo* to the working class along with increasing industrialization and technological and market shifts in rural and urban economies meant that working class women were increasingly pushed out of the newly-formed formal sector or into poorly paid jobs that were hypothetically designed to provide dependent women with “pin money.”

This discussion of the impacts of early twentieth-century shifts on working class women suggest two very important but somewhat opposed outcomes requiring much more research in Brazil and elsewhere. On the one hand, studies of the recent incorporation of working (and perhaps, lower middle) class women into the work force may be flawed by their failure to take into account that these women’s location in and identification with the home may have been, in fact, a one- or two-generation phenomenon, lasting from approximately the 1920s to 1960s, rather than a “traditional” pattern. On the other hand, as Hahner also suggests, working class women may have never left the labor force in any significant numbers since a family wage for men never became widespread in Brazil. Rather, the appearance of their absence owes more to their insertion principally within the informal sector and to the fact that for ideological reasons (i.e. *marianismo*), census-takers and social science researchers concerned themselves primarily with male heads of households.

The other significant issues raised in this discussion of working class women relate to recent formulations regarding the informal sector and changing family roles and ideologies although space precludes an expanded discussion of these concerns. Rather than concentrating so much attention on exploring the current growth in the informal sector, the experience of working class women as brief and intermittent participants in the formal sector suggests that, for women, the informal sector is neither new nor necessarily expand-

ing and more attention might be profitably given over to the particulars of the recent origin and development of the formal sector. Secondly, as anthropologists, sociologists, politicians, and the media increasingly make assumptions about “traditional” families, this discussion is an important reminder that there is nothing “traditional” about “traditional” families.

This brings me to what are, in my view, the major shortcomings of Hahner’s book. Generally, the book drags at some points, skips others, and oversimplifies yet others. Of particular concern are the over-simplifications and, at times, stereotypic biases. Given Hahner’s arresting discussion of class divergences, the reader is acutely frustrated by her failure to extend this class sensitivity to much of her discussion of the history of the women’s movement in Brazil or to gender roles, ideologies, and interests and to concepts of family, marriage, and the home. Her exclusive reliance upon written, rather than oral, materials and her definition of what constitutes feminism, feminists, and a women’s movement is particularly biased towards the concerns of middle and upper class women and leads her to conclude that women’s rights movements “are dependent on a class of educated women with some leisure” (p. xiii) and that “without middle-class women and the intellectual and financial resources they contribute, the feminist movement would falter” (p. 206). Having defined a “legitimate” women’s movement in terms of middle and upper class concerns, Hahner logically concludes that middle and upper class women are necessary to its survival. What she overlooks, however, are other sorts and understandings of feminism that are different from, and perhaps at odds with, those of the upper classes and do not require the upper classes for their genesis or survival. Her concern with a small but privileged sector of Brazilian society also seems to lead her at times to the simplistic conclusion that some vague combination of “modernization,” urbanization, and education are necessary for the “liberation” of women while failing to heed her own discussion which correctly points out that these processes impact very differently on women from different classes, regions, and cultural backgrounds.

For Brazilianists who conduct research outside of what appears to be the foreign historian’s preferred Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo urban hub, Hahner’s book also promises to frustrate. With apparently little or no research in the populous

Northeast, Hahner offhandedly dismisses the history and activities of the region's women with references to the traditional, backwards, and poor Northeast. As a result, the reader is left with no basis to understand why or how women in the small northeastern state of Rio Grande do Norte gained the vote in 1927, five years before women elsewhere in Brazil, or why and how the country's first female mayor and first female doctor as well as several early female state legislators came from this region. Similarly, rural areas where widowed elite women frequently directed large agricultural enterprises and poor women worked alongside men in the fields are equally ignored.

These omissions and deficiencies, however, do not ultimately detract from Hahner's timely and thought-provoking contribution and hopefully will serve to inspire others to ask new and provocative questions. This work promises to generate new research on a variety of topics relevant to anthropology. This might take the form of research on histories of rural and working class women's agency, resistance, and self-concepts as well as the methodological challenges these concerns pose or on actual as opposed to idealized female and male conceptions of family, marriage, and gender roles and relations.

