

Book Reviews

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ANDÚJAR, Andrea; Laura CARUSO; Florencia GUTIÉRREZ; Silvana PALERMO; Valeria Silvina PITA y Cristiana SCHETTINI, 2016, *Vivir con lo justo. Estudios de historia social del trabajo en perspectiva de género. Argentina, siglos XIX y XX*, Rosario, Prohistoria Ediciones. 160 pp.

Vivir con lo justo is a collected work by six historians from the Interdisciplinary Institute of Gender Studies (Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios de Género, LIEGE) at the University of Buenos Aires. They have been working on issues related to the history of social work from the perspective of gender for several years and have made valuable contributions to Argentine historiography on the topic.

This volume is constructed at the intersection of this line of research with the suggestive proposal of Carolyn Steedman (2012) from the field of social history for the study of law and justice. In fact, the book starts with a quote from this British historian in which she defends the interpretation of the law as a mode of living and thinking that permeates the daily actions of the subjects we study. From this perspective, the authors note that the principal challenge for social historians lies in “discovering how these individuals thought and lived the law in their daily lives, in its most dramatic and its most trivial dimensions, and what this tells us about their worlds and their struggles”¹ (p. 13). Thus, the theme that cuts across this compilation is the analysis of different episodes of Argentine history in which men and women constructed their notions of “lived justice and contesting rights” as the first local approach to this challenge.

In this sense, one of the most interesting aspects of the histories covered in this book is that they do not take place within courts. In order to understand the meanings that working women and men assign to the law in their daily lives, each author uses a highly varied set of documents, which include sources produced by government authorities, the commercial press,

1 All quotations in this review are by *Apuntes*.

archives of businesses, and even from the subjects involved such as the trade union press, legal petitions, and correspondence.

In addition to a collective introduction by the authors, the book contains six chapters which cover different moments in Argentine history between the end of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th. The chronological order of the book, however, is not due to a teleological vision or any other model related to the acquisition of rights; rather, it reflects a desire to establish a productive dialogue with “political history, and the history of justice and the organized labor movement, which was still male and almost always white” (p. 11).

The first two chapters analyze two phenomenon which were common in the modes of living and working in the city of Buenos Aires at the end of the 19th century. The first of these, by Valeria Silvina Pita, studies the situation in the city in the summer of 1871, when a yellow fever epidemic spread through the population. In the second chapter, Cristiana Schettini concentrates on the transformations that were taking place in the world of sex workers during the decade that followed the regulation of brothels in Buenos Aires, by way of municipal ordinance in 1875. Both studies have the merit of attracting our attention to the experiences of subjects habitually ignored by social histories of workers, discovering the ways they lived, worked, and moved around the city. In an era that was characterized by the ongoing construction of a governmental power which, at the end of the 19th century, still needed to define and legitimize its functions, the men and women at the center of these stories appear defending their own notions of rights in order to guarantee their living conditions in the city against what they consider to be the unjust interference of authorities and other residents.

The next four chapters cover the first half of the 20th century and concentrate on the experience of various collectives of workers in different regions of Argentina: Laura Caruso writes about workers on ships in the context of WWI; Silvana Palmero analyzes the great railroad strike of 1917; Andrea Andújar looks into the case of petroleum workers and their participation in the strike of 1932 in Comodoro Rivadavia; and finally, Florencia Gutiérrez writes about sugar workers in Tucumán during the first Peronismo.

The four studies share a concern for occupational groups that were predominantly male and politically organized and unionized to some degree. In this sense, they coincide with the dominant tradition within the historiography of the labor movement, which from the outset has demonstrated a predilection for the study of male organized workers. However, unlike the majority of such studies, here gender is not considered a neutral category,

capable of subsuming the history of women into an account in which, in the final analysis, they are absent.

The authors of this book, when analyzing the experience of these workers' communities from a gender perspective, reveal that the workers' conceptualization of masculinity (based on particular values and meanings that were defined in daily life) was to be found in how they constructed their own notion of rights. In their relationships with businesspeople and superiors, in their labor organization and their participation in workers' struggles, and in their daily battles for "what is just," these men called on specific values associated with the ideal adult male – virile and a provider – that allowed them to define their position vis-à-vis their families and communities and, at the same, legitimize their demands. Nevertheless, they were not alone in these struggles: when it came to the defense of their families' livelihood, in their confrontations with authorities, and as an invisible and unpaid labor force (as the Tucuman case reveals), women occupied a notable place, going beyond the boundaries of the home to emerge in the public space and challenge this entrenched masculine imagery through their actions. When taken together, these studies help bring to light how porous and unstable the boundaries are between public and domestic space in the concrete experiences of working men and women.

While the time frame included in the title would seem to imply a chronology of the 19th and 20th centuries, the studies only extend to the 1940s. Given that even now, when people are fired and businesses closed, one still speaks of "families" who are left with nothing and we see "women's commissions" being formed to support their partners in their struggle, we think that it is absolutely relevant for future research to follow up on the proposal of these authors – that is, to historicize more recent "struggles for what is just" and "contestations for rights." Similarly, we think that it would be interesting to research the construction of notions of rights among female workers' communities and among the population of working children. As the authors point out, this book is only a first approximation to the challenge of analyzing the meanings attributed to the law and to justice in the daily lives of workers. We hope that it will inspire social historians studying workers and the labor movement.

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