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Review: [untitled]

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Reviewed work(s):

In Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early-Twentieth-Century Brazil by Sueann Caulfield

Source: *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 5 (Dec., 2002), p. 1614

Published by: American Historical Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3091366>

Accessed: 29/09/2008 09:11

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Brazilian exceptionalism, of how the province of Brazil achieved a degree of self-determination without loss of its Jesuit identity, ethos, and sense of communion, and of how the vineyard could be made to appear to bear fruit. This book joins recent studies by Dauril Alden (*The Making of an Enterprise: The Society of Jesus in Portugal, Its Empire, and Beyond, 1540–1750* [1996]) and Gauvin Alexander Bailey (*Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773* [1999]) to form a trilogy of works of outstanding scholarship and originality of interpretation that contribute to greater recognition and understanding of the complexity and variety of the many facets of the Society of Jesus.

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SUEANN CAULFIELD. *In Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early-Twentieth-Century Brazil*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 2000. pp. xiv, 311.

A young man in Rio de Janeiro wrote a male friend in 1922 to say that he had ended his relationship with a woman “because her parents wanted me to marry her. But I’ll marry only at the police station.” Describing himself as “a little gluttonous for women,” he also boasted of taking the “three pennies” (virginity) of another: “I’m still feeling the pleasure but I am so scared that my heart hurts.” This incriminating letter was seized by the police as part of a deflowerment case brought on behalf of a nineteen-year-old Portuguese domestic servant. Three weeks after his foolhardy admission, the young man made “right” his violation of her sexual honor by marrying his “honest” victim (pp. 1–3).

This fine monograph by Sueann Caulfield is enriched by such vignettes of interpersonal attraction and betrayal, gender conflict, and state intervention on behalf of young women of the poorer classes in Rio de Janeiro. Caulfield makes good use of 450 police investigations and trials for deflowering between 1918 and 1941 to explore notions of family respectability, the “protection” of daughters, and the art of courtship. We can see a predatory male sexuality that coexists with female naïveté in a world of double standards where even the ideal of virginity could contribute to a woman’s dishonor (many men admitted having said “show me you’re a virgin and I’ll marry you” and then claimed she wasn’t). We also learn about dubiously respectable young women (semi-virgins) who were “materially” virgin but judged not honorable (another line of male defense).

Caulfield also offers us surprises: unmarried single mothers accepted by the police and judges as “honest” heads of households as well as rebellious daughters who used sex to free themselves from unwanted familial authority. In her admirable use of these records, Caulfield joins in a rich tradition of creative research on Rio that goes back to Sidney Chalhoub’s *Trabalho, lar e botequim* (1986) while extending and broadening

Martha de Abreu Esteves’s book on deflowering, *Meninas perdidas* (1989). Whereas those authors highlighted the cultural autonomy of the popular classes, Caulfield is far more impressed by the shared vocabularies between working-class folk and their social superiors who wrote, enforced, and endlessly debated such laws (pp. 13–14). Yet Caulfield does recognize divergences, especially a widespread popular acceptance of consensual unions and premarital sex (this did not lessen, however, the cultural and moral value accorded to the legal institution of marriage).

Her conclusions about Rio’s most common recorded sexual crime could have been further strengthened through a conscious focus on masculinities. The ubiquitous *malandro*/hustler figure is clearly relevant and figured centrally in Rio’s rich world of popular culture and music. Judging by José Jorge de Carvalho’s recent essay, 1930s samba lyrics also fused sexist and racist stereotypes in ways that shed light on the Brazilian peculiarities that figure in chapter five’s sharp but somewhat inconclusive discussion of the “importance of color in sex and marriage” (p. 145).

Caulfield innovates most radically in framing her study so as to highlight the centrality of gender in the construction of alternative national imaginaries. As she communicates quite well, the establishment of the republic in 1889 inaugurated a period of institutional and ideological ferment that intensified after 1920, especially with Getúlio Dornelles Vargas’s rise to power in 1930. In her exploration of legal discussions of women’s honor and honesty, Caulfield embraces legal history while avoiding the most common error made by social historians: to allow the legal setting, the grammar of the law, and its procedures to recede into the background.

Too often, discussions of honor end up reifying it more than they unravel its meaning and social significance. This book approaches honor as an evolutionary concept and shows that no one agreed on what the term meant in the Old Republic. The energy and effort the author spends in decoding legal commentaries and studying the criminal and civil codes also deserves praise, as does her preliminary effort to connect republican legal discourses of honor to the preceding colonial and imperial periods. (Linda Lewin’s forthcoming monograph, *Surprise Heirs: Illegitimacy, Inheritance Rights, and Public Power in the Formation of Imperial Brazil, 1821–1889*, may answer many of these questions.)

In summary, this book opens fruitful paths for further research into the role, function, and dynamics of the production and appropriation of law by both republican legal elites and working-class common folk. In this regard, Caulfield tackles, with significant initial success, the difficult task of grasping the interconnection between elite prescription and popular practice(s) through the study of how law is made and applied.

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