

SEXUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

COLONIAL LATIN AMERICA

In terms of global sexual patterns, probably the most important overall change in the early modern period involved the growing, and often forcible, intrusion of Europeans into other parts of the world, bringing new sexual appetites and new moralism in a confusing combination. And nowhere was this more significant than in Latin America as it came increasingly under Spanish and Portuguese control.

Exploitation. A pattern of sexual exploitation began with Columbus, who, while praising certain qualities in the natives he encountered, also found them inferior in many ways – including their near-nakedness. He seized some Caribe women in the West Indies as slaves, giving one to a friend who later wrote: “I captured a very beautiful Caribe woman...when I had taken her to my cabin, she was naked, as was their custom. I was filled with my desire to take my pleasure with her. She was unwilling, and so treated me with her nails that I wished I had never begun...I then took a piece of rope and whipped her soundly...She seemed to have been brought up in a school for harlots.”

It is unclear whether Columbus exported some natives as sex slaves, but without question the use of force or disproportionate power continued on the part of European settlers for many decades. The practice was exacerbated by the fact that Spanish conquerors were predominantly male, and it would take some time for a more normal gender balance to develop. Exploitation was also encouraged by a European belief that the natives themselves were licentious. It was true that some sexual activity before marriage was accepted among some indigenous groups, as a means of deciding if a possible partner was suitable for the long term; but Europeans greatly exaggerated their claims. The common image involved a mixture of moral condescension and a tendency to eroticize indigenous women – a potent mixture. Thus a Portuguese adventurer claimed that native women readily allowed him to inspect their “private parts” while displaying no embarrassment. Obviously, some unions formed out of genuine mutual attachment, but there was no guarantee. One Spanish adventurer may have sired as many as 30 children, with a number of women, during a 7-year stay. Some Europeans boasted of their sexual conquests, like the Spanish conqueror Cortes, in Mexico, who quickly took a native mistress and became known as the “fucker” (*shingon*) with “golden balls” (*huevos d’oro*).

Illegitimacy. One result of this sexual pattern was the rapid expansion of a mixed indigenous-Spanish, or *mestizo*, population, which ultimately outnumbered any other sector. Another was a high percentage of illegitimate births, that endured well beyond the colonial period, though force was no longer necessarily involved in the coupling. Sex and marriage had a looser relationship among many Latin Americans that was true in most other cultures.

Despite efforts by missionaries and others, concerned about European behavior, outright sexual violence remained a common problem. Efforts to take rapists to court rarely succeeded, and often simply brought greater shame to the victim – a problem in many societies, to be sure.

Moral regulation. At the same time, Europeans also sought to impose their version of morality on indigenous peoples, though clearly with mixed results. The widespread native custom of tolerated “two-spirit” peoples was widely distorted as indulgence of homosexuality – described by one Spaniard as “a devilish thing”, and the practice was widely suppressed. Clothing styles were another target, and though many indigenous people did not fully adopt European dress they were pressed to cover themselves more completely. A common European belief held that native Americans had no shame, and the new overlords were eager to correct this.

Marriage habits caused great concern, ironically, given the exploitative behavior of many colonists. Conventional Catholic standards combined with the sometimes distorted beliefs about indigenous habits. Some indigenous groups had allowed women to leave their husbands fairly readily if dissatisfied for any

reason, but new colonial laws sought to end this practice. The behavior of girls was carefully watched. A girl simply found in a cabin with a man, however innocently, might be punished. Missionaries' emphasis on sin could leave a deep mark on the young, as with one woman who wept after a man had simply touched her hand, worried that she had lost her virginity.

A social/cultural gap. Ultimately, a durable divide opened up, in a highly stratified society, between the upper classes, largely of European origin, and the rest of the population. Beliefs in native licentiousness combined with awareness of high rates of illegitimacy to create a widespread sense that lower-class sexual behavior was out of control. The fact that upper-class men continued frequently to sire illegitimate offspring did nothing to dent the bias. Recurrent moral reform efforts would dot Latin American history, with mixed results beyond reinforcing established prejudices.

Finally, in various social groups, a culture of virility developed that placed high premium on male sexual prowess – as basic element in *machismo*. Boast of sexual adventures were common, regardless of their accuracy.

Study questions:

1. Why were rates of illegitimacy so high in colonial Latin America?
2. What traditional practices elicited particular criticism from Spanish colonists?
3. What was the basis of ongoing criticism of lower-class sexual patterns?

Further reading:

Sex and Sexuality in Latin America: an interdisciplinary reader. Ed. By Daniel Balderston and Dorina Guy (New York University Press, 1997).

Sexuality and the Unnatural in Colonial Latin America. Ed. By Zeb Torotici (University of California Press, 2016).

Sex and Sexuality in Early America. Ed. M.D. Smith (New York University Press, 1998).

Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest. By Matthew Restall (Oxford University Press, 2003).

19TH CENTURY

Many features in Latin American sexuality persisted from the colonial period, when the intrusion of Western Christian standards had already occurred. Official disapproval of homosexuality, for example, remained intense. Upper-class representatives continued to defend the sanctity of the family, urging chastity before marriage (particularly for respectable young women) and discountenancing adultery. Lower-class behavior came in for intense criticism.

Illegitimacy and sexual violence. In fact, gaps between standards and actual behaviors loomed large, and not just in the lower classes; here too, many colonial trends were maintained. Rates of illegitimacy remained high. Many men maintained liaisons outside marriage. Until the abolition of slavery, which came late in many countries, sexual exploitation remained widespread. Efforts by slave women to protest rape were usually futile, because the burdens of proof were too great; and few even tried. Even aside from exploitation, many couples simply didn't bother with marriage, though Catholic campaigns did gradually drive the marriage rate up. False promises of marriage constituted another common problem (as was true in Western society as well), with some men pledging marriage to induce sexual compliance and then walking away. Women sometimes sued successfully, but more often the men involved managed to impugn their reputation by implying they had had previous relationships. Double standard sexuality clearly reduced women's latitude compared to men.

Reform pressures. Later in the 19th century several issues began to generate regulatory attention. Evidence of rising rates of venereal disease generated new efforts to regulate prostitution. During the first half of the 20th century Argentina actually tried to outlaw prostitution, while countries like Chile mandated blood tests before marriage. Some reformers also urged more explicit sex education, to help grapple with disease but also ease the pressures on women, but Catholic opposition usually limited actual programs.

Other battles occurred over abortion and birth control. Abortion was illegal throughout the region, though Argentina modified this in the 1920s for women who were raped or whose life was in danger; otherwise, penalties of four years in prison remained on the books. Underground, and even in some hospitals, rates of abortion probably increased, reflecting problems of regulating the birth rate by other means as well as sexual exploitation of women.

New voices. Thanks in part to a growing feminist movement and improvements in women's literacy, some magazines did begin to raise other issues. Thus an article in 1892 discussed the importance of sexuality to women's health and well-being – a rare comment that moved beyond the subject of exploitation and disease. Pressures for more access to birth control mounted by the 1920s: “a woman will never be the mistress of her own body if she cannot choose the moment she wants to become a mother.” More feminists, however, worried about the double standard, focused more on seeking to reduce references to female sexuality in the media, seeing protection rather than expression or new rights as the key goal.

The “white slavery” crisis. Latin America was also deeply affected by a new Western campaign against so-called white slavery, that began to take shape in the 1870s and crested early in the 20th century. Both in Europe and the United States, anxiety grew about the seizure of young women for export to dens of iniquity elsewhere – particularly in Latin America. The crisis was probably blown out of proportion, in terms of the numbers involved, but some problems did exist. In 1877 women from seven Western countries formed the Friends of Young Women association to publicize the issue and insist on redress, and an international bureau formed early in the 20th century to monitor compliance. The campaign expressed the deep stake in female respectability still dominant, in the West and globally, but also some xenophobic shock at the idea of foreigners molesting White women. The campaign explicitly expressed Western belief that sexual morals in other regions were uniformly remiss – one British leader referred to “the absence of any local public opinion on the moral question”.

Latin America was strongly targeted, and also extremely sensitive given concerns about prostitution and dismay at lower-class standards. Argentine leaders thus expressed great remorse that Buenos Aires was so widely regarded as the “worst of all centers of the immoral commerce on women”. The result fueled regulatory efforts in Argentina and other Latin American countries, as well as a massive propaganda campaign; but the issue lingered in the region until after World War II.

Study questions:

1. How did sexual issues in 19th-century Latin America compare to those in Asia and Africa?
2. How and why did sexuality become a social class issue in Latin America?
3. What kinds of new ideas began to circulate about sexuality and sexual problems, and why?
4. Why were Latin American leaders particularly sensitive to the “white slavery” campaign?

Further reading:

Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: prostitution, family and nation. By Donna Guy (University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

Compromised Positions: prostitution, public health, and gender politics in revolutionary Mexico City. By Katherine Bliss (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

Life is Hard: machismo, danger and the intimacy of power in Nicaragua. By Roger Lancaster (University of California Press, 1992).

White Slave Crusades: race, gender, and anti-vice activism, 1887-1917. By Brian Donovan (University of Illinois Press, 2006).