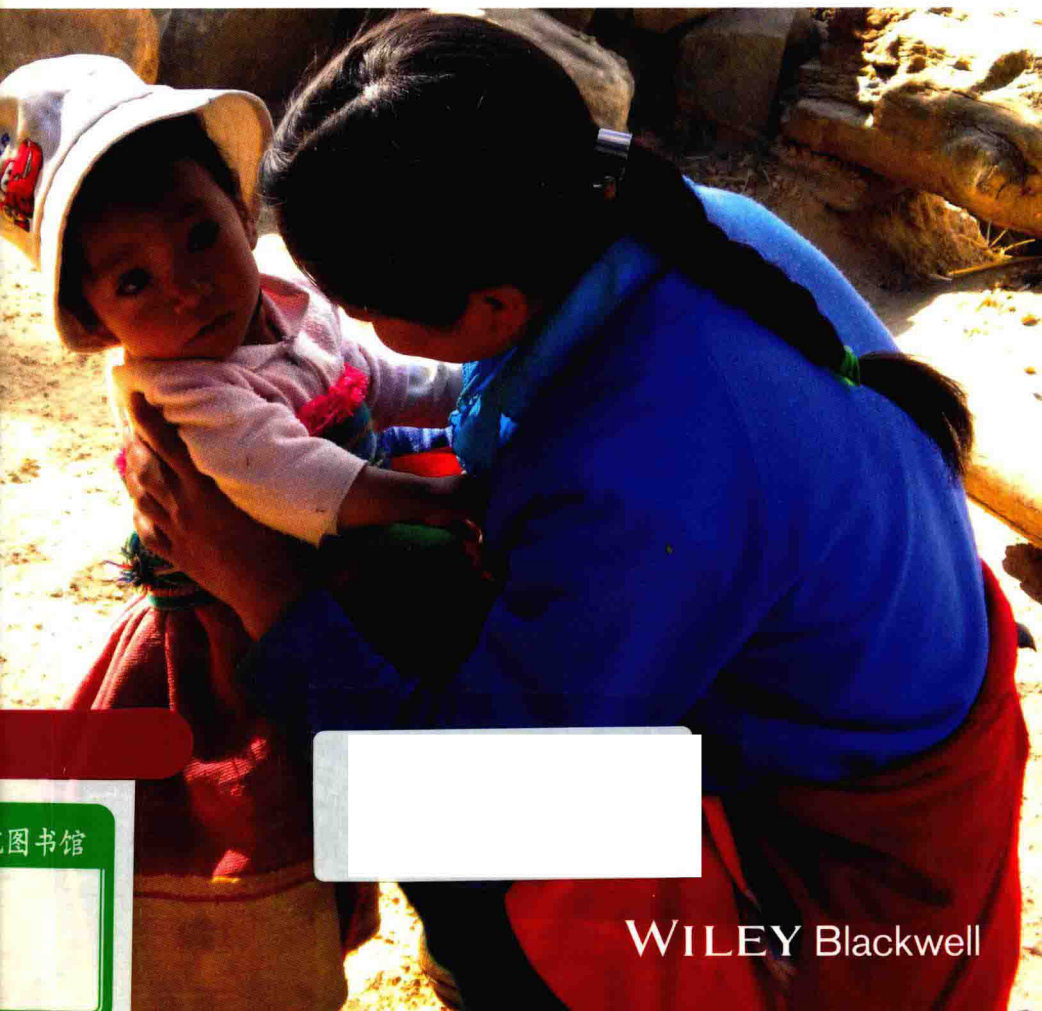


VIEWPOINTS / PUNTOS DE VISTA

MOTHERS MAKING LATIN AMERICA

GENDER, HOUSEHOLDS, AND POLITICS SINCE 1825

ERIN E. O'CONNOR



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WILEY Blackwell

Mothers Making Latin America

**Gender, Households,
and Politics Since 1825**

Erin E. O'Connor

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Mothers Making Latin America

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The books in this series will introduce students to the most significant themes and topics in Latin American history. They represent a novel approach to designing supplementary texts for this growing market. Intended as supplementary textbooks, the books will also discuss the ways in which historians have interpreted these themes and topics, thus demonstrating to students that our understanding of our past is constantly changing, through the emergence of new sources, methodologies, and historical theories. Unlike monographs, the books in this series will be broad in scope and written in a style accessible to undergraduates.

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Series Editor's Preface

Each book in the “Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista” series introduces students to a significant theme or topic in Latin American history. In an age in which student and faculty interest in the Global South increasingly challenges the old focus on the history of Europe and North America, Latin American history has assumed an increasingly prominent position in undergraduate curricula.

Some of these books discuss the ways in which historians have interpreted these themes and topics, thus demonstrating that our understanding of our past is constantly changing, through the emergence of new sources, methodologies, and historical theories. Others offer an introduction to a particular theme by means of a case study or biography in a manner easily understood by the contemporary, non-specialist reader. Yet others give an overview of a major theme that might serve as the foundation of an upper-level course.

What is common to all of these books is their goal of historical synthesis. They draw on the insights of generations of scholarship on the most enduring and fascinating issues in Latin American history, and through the use of primary sources as appropriate. Each book is written by a specialist in Latin American history who is concerned with undergraduate teaching, yet has also made his or her mark as a first-rate scholar.

The books in this series can be used in a variety of ways, recognizing the differences in teaching conditions at small liberal arts colleges, large public universities, and research-oriented institutions with doctoral programs. Faculty have particular needs depending on whether they teach large lectures with discussion sections, small lecture or discussion-oriented classes, or large lectures with no discussion sections, and whether they teach on a semester or trimester system. The format adopted for this series fits all of these different parameters.

In this eighth volume in the "Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista" series, Professor Erin E. O'Connor uses motherhood as a lens through which to view gender and family in modern Latin American history. *Mothers Making Latin America: Gender, Households, and Politics since 1825* provides a sweeping overview of both the enduring and the changing aspects of motherhood. The volume covers nearly 200 years, from the time of the macho, militaristic caudillos of the early and mid-nineteenth century to the present day, which features women presidents (all three of them mothers) in Argentina, Brazil, and Costa Rica. Geographically, the book includes examples from all of the major regions of Latin America as well as the Caribbean. By means of this analysis, readers come to understand the struggles of women to earn their rightful place in a patriarchal world. They also learn to appreciate the ways in which patriarchal structures change rather than disappear, notwithstanding the fact that women now serve in prominent political, economic, and cultural roles.

A particular feature of this book is the dialogue between captivating case studies and insightful interpretation. These case studies include women from different social classes and ethnic/racial origins, from an Argentine political activist organizing to protest the fate of her "disappeared" son, to a Brazilian *favela* (shantytown) dweller who wrote her diary on scraps of paper. Moving back and forth between these case studies and overarching analysis, Professor O'Connor has crafted a sophisticated, yet highly accessible book that will be of interest to scholars, students, and a general audience alike.

Jürgen Buchenau

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Acknowledgments

The story of this book dates back to the 2011 meeting of the American Historical Association, when Jürgen Buchenau asked me if I might be interested in proposing a book for the *Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista* series. He did not know it at the time, but Jürgen was inviting me to submit exactly the kind of book proposal I'd wanted to make for a long time, though I had only recently realized it. I am grateful to Jürgen, and to Peter Coveney at Wiley-Blackwell, for making it possible for me to write the book that has been percolating in my teacher-scholar consciousness for many years. The process, from day one, has been a joy.

Bringing scholarship to the classroom in a meaningful and manageable way is a huge undertaking, and my greatest debts are to the students who continually inspire and challenge me to become a better teacher. These debts date back many years, and to more institutions than my current one; sadly, that means that the number of student names would be far too long to list here. However, I do want to give heartfelt thanks to students who took my courses – both surveys and colloquia – on gender in Latin American history over the years at Bridgewater State University (BSU). I taught Latin American Women's and Gender history at BSU in 2004, 2006, 2010, and 2012; Gender, Race, and Nation in 2007, 2008, 2010, and 2013; and Gender and Nation in 2011. The students in these classes, mostly history majors, went on journeys of history and historiography with me that have made me a better scholar as well as a better teacher. I must give particular thanks to my classes in Latin American Women's and Gender history in Fall 2012 who read an early draft of the manuscript in class with me. I was, and remain, thoroughly impressed and deeply moved by how seriously they took their job as my class testers for this book. Their likes, dislikes, observations, and confusions allowed me to make this a better book than it would otherwise have been.

I have been fortunate to have several colleagues to whom I have been able to turn for support, insights and ideas, and constructive criticisms, and I only have room to name a few of them here. I owe a debt of gratitude to Leo Garofalo, not only for his input on my initial ideas for this book, but also for his inspiration and camaraderie in coediting an earlier project that introduced me to the art of writing for undergraduate audiences. Mrinalini Sinha taught me how to do gender analysis and has been very patient with the fact that I have claimed as a lifelong mentor. Minnie encouraged me when I conceived of this project and bolstered me when I felt uncertain about it; her belief in me is invaluable. Nick Racheotes listened to my every complaint and joy in the process of writing, and he kept me laughing through it all. My greatest academic debts with this project are to Nicola Foote and Marc Becker, who read each of these chapters and commented honestly on them even when I did not want them to do so. They also both helped me (Marc most especially) to obtain sources that I needed in order to revise the manuscript while I was living and researching another project in Quito. I owe Nicola particular thanks for having discussed each chapter with me, and for introducing me to Jürgen back in 2011. Tanja Christiansen, Nicola Foote, and Margaret Power also shared primary-source documents with me for the book. I must also thank the anonymous reviewers for Wiley-Blackwell who engaged so meaningfully with the manuscript. I did not follow every one of their suggestions, but their ideas, praise, and criticisms inspired and challenged me to strengthen this book in very important ways. As always, the shortcomings in this book are my fault alone.

I am lucky to work at BSU, a teaching institution that values and supports scholarship, and where I find myself in a community of teacher-scholars who inspire me on a daily basis. Writing groups at BSU helped me to keep moving forward even when the semester was underway, and I am grateful to my writing group peers, Paula Bishop, Michelle Mamberg, Minae Savas, Stacey Sheriff, and Sarah Wiggins, for their encouragement and insights as I moved forward with this project. Ann Brunjes and Maggie Lowe at BSU have always been encouraging and helpful whenever I needed to think through the particulars of making good pedagogy out of scholarship, or good writing out of pedagogy.

I believe that empathy feeds historical studies, and my own experiences as a daughter and a mother have profoundly shaped how I approach the world, including how I analyze history. My mother, Martha O'Connor, taught me that a religious woman can also stand up quite firmly for her

rights. I did not follow the kind of life that she envisioned for me, but the values and love that she gave to me so willingly continue influence me and my work every day of my life. My father, Gerald O'Connor, taught me through his actions, even more than his words, that men can and should respect women. Dad died in 2009; I miss him still. I also owe a tremendous debt to the family that made a mother of me. My husband, Howard Brenner, puts in a lot of extra parenting time to make sure that I can survive the juggle motherhood and academia. I could not have managed this book without his support and encouragement. Our children, Anya and Samuel, put up with absences from me as I holed up to write, but mostly they were a (much needed) distraction from work that kept my life in perspective. Mothering them, in both its joys and challenges, has given me a much better understanding of and appreciation for the women that I present in this book.

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1

Introduction

Gender and Latin American History, or: Why Motherhood?

Two Tales of Women and Politics

Aída de Suárez did not begin her life as a political activist. She only became politicized when her son was “disappeared” – abducted by the military government without charges or due process. His disappearance turned her world upside down, particularly when she could not find out what happened to him. She described what it was like when she tried to find answers about what happened to her son:

I had a neighbour who was a doctor and after they took my son I went to him and he gave me an injection to calm me down. They come into your house and they take your child like that – you think you’ve gone mad. The injection didn’t calm me at all. At seven in the morning I was in the police station. A guard at the entrance asked me what I wanted. I said my son had been taken away and I didn’t know by who or why. I cried so much he let me in. They took my statement. As I was leaving a policeman at the door said to me, “Señora, there’s no point in coming here. Go to the military regiments, they’re the ones who are taking people. Don’t waste your time here. We have orders so keep out of the zones of their operations.” I went straight to the regiment. They didn’t want to see me. They said that they didn’t know anything and that I should go to the Ministry of the Interior. Then one man told me to try the regiment at Ciudadela. I went there and they said I’d come to the wrong place and that I had to go to the First Army Corps in Palermo. That day I went to all those places but I didn’t find out anything.¹

Aída de Suárez was like many middle-aged and older women whose adult children were disappeared when the Argentine state terrorized its own population from 1976 to 1979 in what eventually came to be known as the Dirty War. Although military violence against civilians began in the 1960s, the Dirty War started during Isabel Perón's presidency, from 1974 to 1976, and it escalated rapidly after military forces overthrew her and established an authoritarian government. By the time that the military regime fell from power in the early 1980s, tens of thousands of Argentine men and women – most of them young – had disappeared and were presumed dead.

De Suárez was among 14 women, mostly housewives who had never been involved in politics before, who met each other in various government offices while trying to find out what had happened to their adult children who had disappeared. Their trips to police, military, and government offices yielded no results, just more frustration and fear. The mothers decided to march silently together around the Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires's central square, in order to bring attention to their plight and, hopefully, to find out where their children were. The movement grew rapidly to include thousands of mothers and grandmothers from many different walks of life, religions, and political perspectives. Though they came from a variety of backgrounds, the women in the movement emphasized their identities as supposedly traditional mothers who were willing to sacrifice anything for their children, and who were more interested in family and morality than in any form of politics. In the end, the Mothers were one of the few groups able to bring international attention to state terrorism in Argentina; other protestors typically ended up among the ranks of the disappeared. The mothers' silent marching undercut the military government's claims to legitimacy, which in turn played a role in the regime's dissolution in the early 1980s.

Fast-forward to 2006, when Michelle Bachelet was elected as Chile's first woman president. In her victory speech, Bachelet stated:

Today we have witnessed the magic of democracy, amigos and amigas. Today we're all equal. The vote of the most humble person is worth the same as the vote of the most powerful. Democracy can help untangle the wishes and hopes of the people. . . .

Starting right now, your hopes are my hopes, your wishes mine. To all the people who welcomed me into their homes, all the men and women who gave me the gift of a hug and a kiss, above all so many women who gave me my victory today, on this night. To all the people from the prov-

inces, I send my greetings and my assurance that I will fulfill the vow I took in the last days of my campaign, that we would remember them when we were here celebrating and surely they are all celebrating in each of their cities our great triumph tonight.

Amigos y amigas, starting March 11, Chile will have a woman president, but it will also be the start of a new phase where we will make sure that the successes we achieve in this great country make their way into the homes of all Chileans, because I want people to remember my government as a government of all, for all. Ours is a dynamic country, with the desire to be successful, that is becoming more and more integrated into the world, a country of entrepreneurs who create prosperity with their ingenuity and creativity. But for Chilean men and women to dare to be entrepreneurial and to innovate, they must also know that the society they live in protects them.²

Later, in her first annual address, Bachelet claimed that her political victory represented the “defeat of exclusion” not just for women, but for Chileans more generally.³ Bachelet was the sixth Latin American woman to hold the office of president, but she was the first to become president who had *not* been married to a high profile male political leader.⁴ Neither did Bachelet highlight her role as a mother to grown children, as some other Latin American women leaders – most notably Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua during the 1990s – had done. Bachelet had an ambitious sociopolitical agenda, promising to achieve gender equity in her cabinet and address women’s issues in Chile as well as the needs of poor Chileans. Though she met only some of her goals, she maintained strong support throughout her presidency from 2006 to 2010, in no small part because she got Chileans through the hardships of the worldwide economic recession that hit during her term.

Since Bachelet’s successful campaign in Chile, three other Latin American women have won the presidency in their respective countries. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner won the 2007 presidential election in Argentina, following in the footsteps of her husband, Néstor Kirchner, who was president from 2003 to 2007. Fernández de Kirchner proved herself politically capable in her own right when her husband died in 2007, leaving her to rule without his support, and she made her own mark on the history of women in politics when she became the first female president in Latin America to win reelection in 2011. Two other women – Laura Chinchilla in Costa Rica and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil – ascended to the presidency via elections in 2010. Rousseff, in particular,

took power in a country with one of the world's fastest expanding and important economies.

Women have often played significant roles in politics in several Latin American countries since the 1970s. However, the nature of their participation and the roles that they have emphasized changed considerably over the course of about 25 years. These transformations in politics have coincided with other developments for women in Latin American societies. For example, fertility rates have fallen dramatically in many Latin American countries: overall, Latin American women have gone from having an average of 5.98 children in 1960 to 2.2 children in 2010.⁵ This drop in fertility rates, however, has not occurred evenly throughout the region. The most dramatic decline in fertility rates has been in Brazil, where women averaged 5.33 children in 1970 and only 2.46 children by 1995. In other countries, the decline was not as dramatic, such as in Guatemala, where in the same time period, women went from having an average of 6.53 children to 5.12 children.⁶ Women in many Latin American countries are also becoming more educated, particularly among the middling and upper classes.

The changes in women's lives raise important questions about Latin American history. The history of the Mothers' movement in Argentina makes one wonder: how could politically inexperienced housewives start a protest movement that helped to bring down a violent authoritarian regime? How and why did these women create a political movement by highlighting, rather than rejecting, their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers? What political, legal, social, and cultural trends in the Latin American past made it possible for such a movement to emerge? *Why* did these women – and later political figures, such as Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua – emphasize motherhood in their political pursuits? What might have been the cost of this focus on motherhood in politics? Certainly, although one can find examples of women who used maternalist ideas to their benefit, motherhood also set limits on women's ability to gain an education, make a living, or enter political office. If maternity was a double-edged sword of both opportunity and limitation, why did so many Latin American women utilize this symbolism?

More recent developments identified here also raise questions. Does the recent rise of women presidents since 2000 indicate that Latin American women have broken the so-called glass ceiling in politics? How important is it that Bachelet and Rousseff, in particular, did not draw attention to their roles as mothers or wives, as many politically active