



Review of Josué Ramirez, *Against Machismo: Young Adult Voices in Mexico City* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008), 154 pp.

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The word *macho* has unreflectively become a blanket designation for perceived Latin male characteristics of sexual aggression, violence, repression of women, and intransigence. US and European studies of the region center on the word more than do (even feminist) studies from Latin America. Thus, in practice it constitutes more of an outsider's concept than a term useful to describe the complexities of male identity from within Latin America, and this point comes across in Josué Ramirez's *Against Machismo*. The young adults he interviews are less concerned than US Latinos with the stigmatizing possibilities of the word, perhaps because in Mexico it is often a pejorative directed at others rather than a functional category. The author clearly identifies himself as Puerto Rican from New York and as a Latino whose encounter with the term *macho* within US society means more than it does to the Mexican students he interviews.

Ramirez interviewed 74 young adult students in 1998 at the enormous National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in order to examine how *macho* and *machismo* are used in coming-of-age narratives in Mexico City. He does not set out to define *machismo* and states his overall conclusion as: "the Mexican university students I interviewed . . . used the words *macho* and *machismo* to define things they reject in their families of origin and in the cultural past" (p. 2). Therefore, the students' life stories contain equally interesting information about their parents' generation who were students during the social changes of the 1970s, and Ramirez points out that both parents and students have lived in transitional periods for Mexican politics and for gender identities. The author focuses on the narrative structure of life stories and the semantics of *macho* as a term vacated of the positive attributes of provider or protector. Ultimately, the book indirectly reveals *macho* as a highly constructed and relative term that contains more information about the speaker's assumptions about social class and gendered self in a Mexican context than about any essentialized masculine identity in the men described by the term. While Ramirez does not state this, it is a valuable lesson contained in his study and reflects recent scholarship in Latin American masculinities.

After a description of UNAM and its role for the middle class and modernization, Ramirez's introduction points out the middle class's close relationship with the state in Mexico and the changes in generations of students. He also explains that the concept of *machismo* was constructed in the middle class imaginary during the modernizing decades of the mid-twentieth century, when segments of the middle class were also particularly open to US influence, though Ramirez contradicts himself in the conclusion when he describes *machismo* as an "aristocratic idiom" (p. 115). The push for modernization, the urban context versus

the countryside, generational conflicts, and social class are interlinked themes Ramirez signals as underlying the interviewed students' life stories. The term *macho* does not dominate the students' narratives, but rather appears more commonly when the author uses it in his questions, and when he analyzes the conversations.

The psychology students interviewed in Chapter 1 consistently reject *machismo* as identity or ideal, but rather perceive it as a consequence of underdevelopment from their perspective as members of the "aggressively modernizing" middle class. The word becomes intertwined with social class and urban versus rural contexts as they associate a higher educational level with less *machismo*. In their family narratives, the students saw migration to the city and generational shifts as indicative of change, and in the process reflected the way in which inhabitants of the capital often see *campesinos* as a hindrance to national progress. *Machismo* becomes a metaphor for underdevelopment within this outlook.

In Chapter 2, in the more male-dominated and traditional atmosphere of the prestigious engineering school, the interviews highlight adolescent awkwardness and pressures on first-year students as creators of hostility toward women. Here, students associate insecurity and possessiveness with *machismo*, and one female student asserts that *machismo* still exists at the university, though broader cultural changes, the influence of US pop culture, and migration between the US and Mexico have diminished it. Another student leads Ramirez to link political cynicism to the uncritical maintenance of gender and class privileges.

Chapter 3 uses interviews and science students' "life charts" of educational periods, learning, friendship, and family stress in order to highlight painful moments in their socialization and conflicts about gender norms. Ramirez articulates his main question as: how have gifted children in Mexico survived gender norms in sometimes repressive homes and communities? As in Chapter 1, the term *macho* evokes generational antagonism, whether with mothers or fathers. Here Ramirez seems to skirt around lesbian identity or experience in "Marie's" life history—including her confrontation with "heterosexist" society—without discussing homosexuality anywhere in the book. After an extended description of his experience with his upper-middle-class host family in the colonial Coyoacán neighborhood, the author discusses *marianismo*, the patriarchal construction of self-sacrificing motherhood emulating the Virgin Mary, in a section that would benefit from more updated sources focused more on Mexico.

In the divorce narratives related in Chapter 4, *machismo* represents "the authoritarian and the unacceptable" (p. 93). The two young men's stories that constitute most of this chapter include fathers who commit suicide, with one mother who progressed and set the rules as the father lagged behind, and another mother blamed by the father for the student's problems. Through the young men's descriptions of their families, tragedies, father-son relationships, and coping mechanisms, the complexities and variations in male and female identity clearly show. While one student did not consider his father a failure, the author terms the other father a "collapsed father figure" (p. 107), leading into a final section that discusses the idea of "ineffectual" men in David Gilmore's work.

Several characteristics of this book indicate it is a lightly revised dissertation and they can distract the reader. Some generalizations feel too facile, and discussion

of theoretical texts often resembles review of literature in the field rather than straightforward integration of ideas. Ramirez defines basic terms and his role as ethnographer more completely or insistently than necessary for a scholarly audience. This insistence creates a tone where the author seems pressed to prove himself and his methodology to a committee of readers, with constant self-references that create a book not just about the semantics of *machismo* among university students, but also about Ramirez's own cultural encounter with Mexico and his intense enjoyment of friendships and conversations with Mexican students. Apart from life charts, the illustrations seem to support this since they tend to capture endearing aspects of UNAM life, such as a student's old VW Beetle, rather than illuminate the study's focus.

Ramirez's study seems directed toward an audience outside Latin American Studies, since he carefully explains information with which Latin Americanists would be familiar. From the beginning Ramirez narrates as someone new to Mexico, which would allow an undergraduate reader to identify with his surprise at what he encounters, but the sometimes naïve or melodramatic tone is less effective for a scholarly reader. An example is the assertion that "I present a vivid picture of living, breathing Mexicans" (p. 4), which emphasizes Mexicans' mystification and distance from the reader, presumably the opposite of Ramirez's intentions. There are errors in some of the Spanish used, some mistranslations into English, and occasional misleading explanations of Spanish terms and Mexican history. These are details, but affect the text's authority in speaking about a Mexican context.

Ramirez asserts several times that he is breaking new ground and refers to "my style of ethnography," yet while his study of a particular middle-class demographic is a useful contribution, there is little evidence of new ground in his approach. In the conclusion he states that: "What I do well is combine an emotionally engaged style of fieldwork with a long acquaintance with intellectual history and social theory. That is my relative advantage as a scholar" (pp. 114–15). The thin bibliography and spotty theoretical coverage do not break new ground, nor does the combination of personal engagement with theory. He does not cite any sources written since the 1990s and does not address the symbolically significant 2000 presidential elections that ousted the long-time ruling PRI party, which would be relevant to his observation in the introduction that the "apparent waning of authoritarian rule" is linked to "increasing openness in everyday culture" (p. 4).

Although his book does not fully elaborate them, Ramirez correctly identifies productive research directions based on these stories of middle-class Mexican university students and their parents. Those directions come together in the changing role of the middle class in the post-revolutionary discourse of national modernization and the intersection of class, race, and gender with that context. In the process, *macho* and *machismo* assume shifting meanings based on the speaker as much as on the man described. Without articulating the point, Ramirez contributes to the study of masculinities by providing us interviews that reveal the terms *macho* and *machismo* as ineffective descriptors of Latin men, but rather as lenses through which to study social and cultural relationships between the speaker and the person signified.

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