



Sueann Caulfield. *Em defesa da honra: moralidade, modernidade e nação no Rio de Janeiro, 1918-1940*. Campinas, Ed. da UNICAMP, 2000.

### **Gender, Honor and the Constitution of Power in Brazil**

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The title of Joan Scott's influential essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" has lost much of the provocative edge it had on its first appearance in 1986. Indeed, its phrasing hardly seems an assertion anymore, for the general argument it contained has, by and large, won out. Partly because of the instigation and inspiration that Scott and other scholars supplied, gender's importance is now a majority, if not quite unanimous, view.

Responding to Scott's more specific methodological admonitions remains, however, a complicated enterprise. After all, Scott urged historians to work from a conception of gender as a central way of signifying and constituting relations of power throughout society--and thus to examine not just women or sexualities or families, but all people, identities, institutions, and processes as gendered. Moreover, merely adding gender to the methodological mix was in her view insufficient; rather, the historian had to tease out the relationships between gender, race, and class.[1]

Sueann Caulfield's engaging study of sexual honor in early-twentieth-century Rio de Janeiro exemplifies the analytical breadth and sophistication that Scott advocated.[2] Caulfield convincingly argues that we must treat gendered notions of honor and decency as more than merely a handy window onto social, cultural, and political developments from the late First Republic (1889-1930) into the Estado Novo (1937-1945); such notions were in fact integral to the vast changes that Brazilian society underwent in the period.

To make this overall case, the author examines how ideas of sexual honor shaped not only the daily lives of Rio's common men and women, but also the debates that jurists, politicians, journalists, and feminists and other social reformers waged over the modernization of their country. The result of her efforts is an exciting book that draws innovative connections between the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless, between "high" and "low" politics, and between gender, race, and the Brazilian nation.

Caulfield makes those links over the course of five wide-ranging chapters. The first of these offers an intriguing survey of the legal constructions of honor in Brazil, from the Portuguese Philippine Ordinances of 1603 to the 1830 criminal code, the 1890 penal code, and the 1916 civil code. Caulfield's explication of the creation and implications of these legal corpuses demonstrates the continuity of patriarchal ideas but also a striking degree of conflict among legal authorities. Statutes from the 1830 criminal code that mandated much harsher penalties for adulterous wives than cheating husbands, for instance, remained in force well into the twentieth century (pp. 24, 42). More important than such specific survivals was the preservation of underlying notions of women's honor as deriving essentially from the control of their sexuality.

At the same time, jurists argued with each other and with other powerful groups over issues from the accuracy and utility of the term "deflowering" to the broad theoretical underpinnings of legal practice. Here Caulfield notes the Brazilian jurists' studied adaptation --and not simple adoption--of Positivism and other currents of European legal thought, as well as their political competition with religious and other government authorities and the racism they displayed in their decisions on sexual crimes; her careful consideration of these factors produces a lively history of legal ideas on honor. Before returning to juridical debates, Caulfield addresses broader issues of gendered geography in

her second chapter. Using the much-publicized visit of Belgian royalty to the city in 1920 as her entry point, she describes how the authors of projects to modernize and civilize the city of Rio during and after its Belle Epoque sought to codify and segregate the "decent" and "indecent." For Europhile reforms and their critics, as Caulfield demonstrates, understandings of "decency" revolved around sexual honor and race.

Drawing on the familiar work of Martha Esteves, Sandra Lauderdale Graham, Sidney Chalhoub, Nicolau Sevcenko, and others, Caulfield here provides further evidence that urban reformers aimed to step up their control over Afro-Brazilians and poor women in particular. Her presentation of the spectrum of opinions on modernization, however, and particularly her attention to discussions of what elements of popular culture properly belonged in the newly civilized city, make this an original and absorbing treatment.

Concerns with modernization's effects on sexual honor ran through all these debates on the "civilization" of Rio; in her third chapter, Caulfield explores jurists' struggles to define honorability in amidst unsettling changes to the urban environment. Once again, the author reveals a great deal of contestation among authorities here, with some decrying Brazilians' "hymenolatry" as a symbol of national backwardness, and others seeking new ways to defend the virginity and thus honor of Carioca girls and, indeed, the nation itself. All, however, experienced the post-World War period as one of anxiety and moral crisis; only their responses to that perceived tumult differed. In some of the book's most interesting passages, Caulfield here lays out divergent positions on crimes of passion and women's sexual pleasure. Ultimately, however, jurists' rejection of women's independence helped these authorities bridge their other political and legal-theoretical divides.

The final two chapters of Caulfield's book rely on 500 court cases on sexual crimes, especially those of deflowering or seduction, to take the reader into the lives of men and women of the popular classes. Caulfield here makes use not only of careful qualitative teasing-out of narratives in these processos but, in chapter five, also applies regression analysis to data from 450 of her cases. This study of the participation of plebeian plaintiffs and defendants, as well as of jurists, allows for a complex portrayal of the workings of sexual honor and race among both non-elite and elite subjects.

She finds that a sexual double standard pertained, by which similar behavior or the occupation of the same urban spaces could damage the honor of a young woman but leave that of a man intact. Though that standard gave some greater freedoms for men, women were not without power; the sheer volume of deflowering cases those girls or their parents (overwhelmingly their mothers, as Caulfield shows) brought suggests that women of Rio saw the juridical apparatus of the state as a major potential resource. More intriguingly, these Cariocas pursued complicated, personal interests that often led different individuals to divergent strategies in court and in personal relationships; tensions between mothers and daughters, as well as between women and the men charged with wronging them, provided the cases with plenty of drama. These women did not directly challenge dominant gender identities, as Caulfield shows, but "nonetheless continually reshaped them" (p. 137) In the final chapter, Caulfield demonstrates that race influenced not only legal authorities' actions in the processos but also the strategies of common folk in and outside the courtroom. Cariocas of all social levels apparently thought race an inappropriate factor in determining social status even while they used race for that very purpose.

An unusually rich epilogue brings Caulfield's story into the Estado Novo period (1937-1945). Based especially in the work of Angela de Castro Gomes, Caulfield outlines the efforts of the government to use a patriarchal discourse to prop up "traditional" social hierarchies and personalism, while also concentrating political power in Vargas' hands (p. 187). Moreover, the regime's interventionist social policies supported men's dominance over women, and a new penal code

continued to reflect patriarchal gender norms (pp. 189, 191). Even Vargas' authoritarian state, however, faced opposition that often expressed itself in a language of gender and honor.

The author's connections between common Carioca women and men, jurists, and the state are clearest in the epilogue, for there she is working at a more "macro" level than in the five chapters of the book. Still, throughout the work Caulfield demonstrates how, in a period when Rio and Brazil were struggling to make sense of modernity, the small-p politics of individual lives and the big-P Politics of state revolved around notions of sexual honor. I wished that the author had more explicitly taken on the regional identity of Rio and its relationship with the nation, but that is only because she provides tantalizing information on the topic at various points in her book.

Indeed, one of the great strengths of *In Defense of Honor* is the tremendous breadth and depth of research that went into it. Caulfield's grasp of very different types of documentation and integration of methods is impressive. Better yet, she carefully grounds her central concerns in the general history of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Brazil. This helpful contextualization, along with the author's entertaining writing style, will make the book accessible to undergraduates.

The analytical ambitiousness of the work will make it of interest not only to specialists in Brazil or Latin America but also to scholars of gendered relations of power in any setting.

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#### Notes

[1]. Joan Wallach Scott. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *American Historical Review* 91, 5 (December 1986).

[2]. Caulfield does not, however, simply apply Scott's proposals; for her evaluation of Scott's work, see Sueann Caulfield. "Getting into Trouble: Dishonest Women, Modern Girls, and Women-Men in the Conceptual Language of Vida Policial, 1925-1927." *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, 1 (1993): 146-76.