

**Steve J. Stern.** *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men and Power in Late Colonial Mexico.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xiii + 478 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2217-3.

THE SECRET HISTORY OF  
**GENDER**



WOMEN, MEN & POWER IN  
LATE COLONIAL MEXICO  
**STEVE J. STERN**

**Reviewed by** Paul Rich

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This substantial, painstakingly documented, and well-written book is an important study of gender relationships among the marginalized in late colonial Mexico, 1760-1821. The author, Steve Stern, is professor of history as well as director of the Latin American and Iberian programs at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He has made several significant contributions to Latin American subaltern studies -- "subaltern" being in his view "A word sufficiently elastic to embrace the subordinated peoples of popular culture..." p.x) -- including *Peru's Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest* and his *Resistance, Rebellion, and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World*.

The investigation he conducted of the original sources on which the work is based is prodigious and will itself be of use to others as a pointer to materials. He spent an enormous amount of time in surveying the criminal records in the Archivo General de la Nacion as well as in the Archivo General del Estado de Oaxaca, Archivo Historico de la Ciudad de Mexico, Archivo Judicial del Tribunal Superior de Justicia del Distrito Federal, Arhcivo del Tribunal Superior de Oaxaca, Juzgado

de Serie Oaxac, Biblioteca Nacional de Mexico, Coleccion La Fragua, Centro de Estudios de Historia de Mexico, Central Regional del Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia (Oaxaca) and the Microfilm del Archivo del Juzgado de Teposcolula. He refers to this as "archival immersion" (p.439) and that is an apt description. Moreover, added to the combing of the archives is a vast bibliography of printed works that runs the gamut from Henry Abelove's *The Lesbian and Gay Reader* to Kersti Yllo's *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse*.

If therefore the resulting lengthy book with its numerous erudite footnotes was hardgoing for the reader, there would be a good excuse based on the amount of material involved. Happily however Dr. Stern has been able to bring to his prose some of the facility and enthusiasm that he has employed in his research, so that *The Secret History of Gender* is not only scholarly but highly interesting. It is in fact an exemplary volume in every way, with an excellent index and extensive notes that indicate the publisher has been as fully

committed to making a fine book as has been Dr. Stern in writing one.

There persists, as Dr. Stern suggests, a somewhat simplistic view of gender in Latin American societies. It still to an extent exists as a subject off to one side, not fully incorporated into mainstream scholarship. He does not of course claim this is uniquely his discovery, and in fact emphasizes that he considers himself to be only part of a wide and developing effort to incorporate gender into historical experience.

The generalizations made about Latin culture as patriarchal do little justice to the men and women who were involved in "bitter, sometimes violent struggles over gender right and obligation". (p.ix) Dr. Stern redresses this by considering legal cases with gender aspects in late colonial Morelos, comparing them with cases in Oaxaca and Mexico City. Morelos, which gave birth to *zapatismo* during the Mexican Revolution, is characterized by him as largely of "rural folk, a narrow majority of whom remained Indian but who were drawn into a life strategy marked by considerable ethnocultural mixing and by direct participation as laborers and vendors in hispanized arenas such as haciendas and in major urban market-places". (p.37)

#### Jose and Maria

The book employs some 800 incidents involving assault or moral transgressions, but begins with the case of one Indian couple in 1806, Jose Marcelino and Maria Teresa. Jose, probably to his eternal regret, spent a Wednesday in October of that year drinking instead of working. He did not go home for lunch and when he did return for dinner, smelling strongly of rum, Maria Teresa stalked out and spent the night with her mother. Jose was so angry over having no wife, no food, and no authority that he thrashed Maria Teresa's kitchen. Maria returned the next day to find it in ruins. When Jose returned there inevitably was a fight and he bashed her with a rock. She fell into a coma and died, and he was arrested. All of this do-

mestic tragedy has Dr. Stern ferreted out from the archives as an example of what he wished to do with such incidents.

When the case made its way to court, it took a strange turn. Jose's mother in-law appeared to say that she had forgiven him. In fact, she he had forgiven him from the moment of the crime! Others came forward to testify to his usual exemplary treatment of his wife. In short, the killing was to be regarded as an anomaly. Now, why such an outpouring of compassion? Dr. Stern theorizes that, "The community elders had decided that the time had arrived to lift Jose Marcelino off the criminal hook and to reintegrate him into the structure of community life and labor. Like other land-poor peasants, Jose Marcelino was customarily advised by the elders where he could find day work in agriculture and was counted on to contribute to the community's tributary obligations to state and church. Few peasants of modest means, let alone an apparent widow like Micaela Maria [the mother-in-law], could withstand for long pressure to reestablish the facade of harmony that would draw an able-bodied man back into community service after a respectable interval of punishment." (p.6) Jose Marcelino received a pardon and went free.

The story, and the others like it, are part of a conversation that Dr. Stern carries on during the book with Mexican history, and indeed a personal dialogue with developments in world history. Aware that such *apparently* private stories as that of Jose and Maria can appear trivial or even prurient, and be criticized as a digression from the "great issues", he challenges the demarcation of public/private. He writes, "Maria Teresa, Jose Marcelino, Micaela Maria: the violent climax of their joined lives pulls us away from the received wisdoms. The stereotyped image of Mexican women as long-suffering objects of gratuitous violence --both victimized and complicitous in an aggressive patriarchal culture -- begins to look like a stereotype whose grain of truth must be inserted

and reinterpreted in a new context. An important corollary, the notion that general harmony and balance prevailed among Indians, as contrasted with the power-seeking and violence of gender relations among mestizos, also begins to look like a stereotype. The facile assumption that the history of public life, a political arena of broad import populated mainly by male historical actors, is sharply demarcated from the history of private life, a social arena of narrower concerns populated mainly by women, families, and male losers, begins to look like an artifice whose foundations require critical reexamination." (p.9)

#### The Fuller Use of Social History

Now, it is important to note that Dr. Stern is *not* making elaborate claims based on one episode or even a collection of such incidents as that of Maria's murder, but he is *asking*, based on the many cases that he cites, that such social history be read not only for itself but for possible implications as far as power and patriarchy. He wants a fuller use made of social history. And he is right that we need to be reminded repeatedly that all too often we as historians have been too fascinated with the patriarch, and not nearly enough with his subjects.

He is on firm ground too, in this reviewer's opinion, when he warns that criminal records, which are now enjoying considerable popularity in academic circles, are *not* the primary property of quantitative researchers. Even 800 cases are a dangerously small base when it comes to quantitative conclusions, but such a sampling is an extremely strong base for the qualitative scholar. "Their ability to generate sociologically meaningful data for statistical analysis, while useful, is only a secondary part of their appeal....The main attraction of these records lies in the extremely rich quality of the depositions and testimonies given by poor women and men, including Indians and *castas*." (p.38) Those who wrote no memoirs and left no oil portraits are thus remembered through the court dossiers.

#### Mainstream and Male-stream

To be correctly read these cases *must* be subject to the kind of in-depth interpretation which Dr. Stern gives them. Consider what transpired in Tepoztlan in 1777. The local population had collected lime for municipal and church improvements, but a new priest had decided to ship it to the church in Tlayacapan. He had the approval of the *gobernador* of Tepoztlan. When the workers attempted to take the lime, the women assailed them with stones, unloaded the mules, and mauled the priest. Dr. Stern's investigations again show that it is necessary to thoroughly research the background to understand the ramifications of such an incident. The priest, it develops, "...had trod on gender sensibilities, practices, and privileges that directly affected women. He opposed, for example, several customary practices associated with courtship and marriage: the brideprice service required of *novios* who brought water and wood to the households of *novias* before formal marriage, the social tolerance of sexual contract between *novias* and *novios* when poor families postponed marriage or encouraged a prolonged courtship phase, and the residence of newlyweds with the young man's parents and the accompanying apprenticeship of the young wife-servant to her mother-in-law." (p.207) He was upsetting the prerogatives of women in family life, not just purloining a load of lime.

When the priest called for a military reinforcement which attempted to arrest some of the women, a crowd of 2000 gathered, confiscated the group's weapons, put some of the men in stocks, and repelled a relief force. Eventually there was a face-saving pardon by the authorities, who backed away from further confrontation. "As everyone knew, women responded fiercely in crises that threatened -- in the women's view -- the well-being of community families. As everyone also knew, the leading positions of women could place men in a bind. The ferocity of rebel women made it more difficult for authorities to find a face

saving retreat from physical confrontation, yet the status of women as gendered property also made it difficult to repress them without inciting proprietary outrage by men...The gendered foundations of political argument and mediation encourage us to see familial metaphor not as casual analogue or charming folkloric idiom but as a capturing of deep and ubiquitous interplays of the political and the familial within subaltern life." (p. 208-209)

That women in old Mexico were not always quiet and submissive will come as no surprise, but *The Secret Story of Gender* shows the complex political and social nuances to gender roles in new ways. Its publication does not mean that a patriarchal image is untrue, but that it needs considerable revision if Dr. Stern's hopes that "estrangement will give way to unity, that affliction will give way to reconciliation" are ever to be realized in a society where the mainstream is still the male-stream.

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