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Steve J. Stern, *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico*

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The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico. By Steve J. Stern. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xiii + 478 pp. Maps, charts, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.)

In this important book, Steve J. Stern looks closely at violence between men and women in Mexico during the last few decades of Spanish colonial rule. He scrutinizes three major regions: Oaxaca, largely indigenous and to some degree autonomous or at least separated from Spanish control;

Morelos, an area of transition between the indigenous and non-indigenous cultures, in which "ethnic blurring was common" (p. 28) and which was more closely tied, economically and politically, to the larger nation; and Mexico City, the richest, largest city in Spanish America. The major focus of the work is on Morelos, but excellent chapters on the other two regions make it possible for the author to test his conclusions comparatively.

The result is an elegant and convincing analysis of gender relations turned violent. Stern's sources are extensive, including most importantly the records of 708 criminal proceedings which involved either violent assault (ranging from homicide to kidnapping) or "transgressions of sexual or family morality" (p. 38), such as adultery, domestic abuse, and false promise of marriage. The vast majority involved violence, although thirteen cases involved both violence and questions of morality.

In his study, he disputes explanations that attribute the majority of cases of violence against women as a transference or "*descarga*" of anger or frustration with the outside world. Although such explanations formed a major part of the discourse included in these cases, particularly by the men who had resorted to violence against women, Stern argues convincingly that most incidents had as their bases easily discernible provocations involving gender issues. He notes that "...once one addresses the question of motivation less as a question of interior psychology...and more as a question of social relations—prosecutions, contestations, and assertions recognizable as set in a given cultural milieu—the motivations of disputes leading to violence are in most instances reasonably clear" (p. 57). *Descarga*, which he defines as "ventings of anger/frustration on an available target in contexts that suggest casual violence bearing little specific motive or connection to the target," accounts for only 7.7 percent of all cases of violent dispute, whether the target is male or female, in colonial Morelos (p. 354). However, when he includes certain kinds of assertions of masculinity as well as the substitution of female for male targets, the proportion rises to 20.5 percent, still a small percentage of the cases.

Questions of property and class issues were also of secondary importance. Even in male-on-male violence, Stern finds gender issues at the root of a large proportion of disputes. Issues ranged from the most important category, disputes between women and men over patriarchal obligations and responsibilities, to competition between men over various kinds of rights in a female and on to assertions of masculinity. For Morelos, Stern finds that 49.7 percent of all violent disputes, and 86.7 percent of cases when women were the targets, had causes that were rooted in gender. In Oaxaca, violent encounters of all kinds were slightly less apt to be gender related (46.7 percent); in Mexico City, they approached 58 percent (pp. 59, 354-355, 372).

Another significant finding disproves the perception that independent

"female deviants and loners" (p. 59) were disproportionately the victims of violent attacks. According to available documentation for Morelos, married women constituted 64.9 percent of targets, and other women living under the supervision of male heads of household, including female youth, comprised another 19.3 percent. Women living alone, most of them widows, were victims in only 15.8 percent of the cases, roughly comparable to the estimates of the numbers of such women in the general female population. Stern maintains, correctly in my view, that these findings make it clear that patriarchal protection was nothing more than a myth. In fact, Stern argues in his introduction that "the more closely bonded the relationship, the more likely the danger of violence for women compared to men...." He also finds, using careful statistical analysis, that for men as victims, the situation is exactly reversed: "the more loosely bonded the relationship, the more likely the danger of violence for men compared with women" (p. 62).

Although the reader might hope for more contextualization of the three regions he discusses, particularly in regard to the cultures of indigenous groups in Morelos and Oaxaca, this study is highly satisfying. Stern's analysis moves the exploration of motivation from the realm of psychoanalysis to the arena of social conflict. In this way, he is able to operationalize the questions he asks in ways that make them more susceptible to historical analysis. He does not deny that stresses such as poverty, class and color relations, and/or community politics might figure in the angers that men and women brought to these disputes. Instead, he suggests that focusing principally on "specific gender contestations" (p. 67) rather than on anger provides more insight into the role of gender and patriarchal relationships in violence. Stern finds that the focus on *descarga* and attitudes toward independent, unattached women as causes of violence "turns out to have been a power-laden discourse of denial" (p. 69). This reader emphatically agrees.

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