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Book Review

Ricardo D. Salvatore and Carlos Aguirre, eds., *The Birth of the Penitentiary in Latin America: Essays on Criminology, Prison Reform, and Social Control, 1830-1940,* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. Pp. 279. $14.95 (ISBN: 0-292-77707-8).

This edited volume is much more than a mere "introduction to a theme that we believe is central to the understanding of the construction of Latin American modernity" (p. xviii). Furnishing essays on Puerto Rico, Brazil, Argentina, Costa Rica, Peru, Chile, and Mexico, which are framed by a sophisticated and provocative interpretive chapter, the editors have produced an anthology rich in historical comparison and innovative within the genre of Latin American cultural history. The individual chapters range from analyses of criminological and positivist discourse, to the role of religious sentiment in the reform of "delinquent women," to the micropolitics of medical policing within the homes of the popular classes. The varying themes of each essay cohere around a set of core questions posed by the editors: when and how did the prison, as concept and institution, become part of the Latin American landscape? What were the possibilities for implanting a Benthamite system of social control based on the isolation and classification of criminals in societies where, in many cases, labor power and notions of the citizen-subject had not yet been sufficiently abstracted by proletarianization and political theory? How did criminology and penology work to discursively mediate the tumultuous transitions from colony to independence, from slavery to emancipation, as well as the dislocating effects of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization? **1**

The responses to these questions differ from country to country. In a comparative chapter, Ricardo Salvatore contends that implementation of the penitentiary in Argentina at the turn of the century was largely successful because of the homogeneity of the population and the nation's degree of industrialization and capitalization due to a burgeoning export economy. Furthermore, criminology became the metaphorical matrix through which Argentine elites shifted a myth of nationhood away from a rural struggle between civilization and barbarism—which ended with the extermination of Native Americans in the 1880s—to a binarism projected onto the city as a divide between the "refined" classes and the criminal. In Brazil, on the other hand, the ruptures brought about by the protracted emancipation of slaves (1888), entrenched notions of social difference based on "race" as expressed in anthropological and evolutionist typologies of the early twentieth century, and the fragmentation of the national economy as various industries waxed and waned in accordance with the global market demands meant that although criminological discourses flourished, replicating a Philadelphia or Elmira model was untenable. **2**

This was the case as well with Peru, where despite reformatory attempts by the lawyer and judge Mariano Felipe Paz Soldán—who traveled to the U.S. to examine the Auburn and Philadelphia systems in the mid-nineteenth century—prison reform remained a chimera, unattainable within "the irresolvable contradiction between a liberal egalitarian discourse and its application in a profoundly hierarchical society" (68). According to Carlos Aguirre's essay, personal and paternal forms of punishment, which had characterized Peruvian slavery, and the dynamics of the forced labor of indigenous groups militated against a comprehensive movement from retribution to rehabilitation. **3**

In her chapter on female delinquents in Santiago de Chile's Correctional House, María Soledad Zárate Campos argues that a bonafide penitentiary rigor was stymied by the "way the nuns constructed the female criminal" (94). In this case, pietistic treatment of women viewed as "unlucky, abandoned, and mistreated" (94) converged but was not superseded by prevailing evolutionist ideas of women's degeneracy. Zárate's essay contemplates the complex interplay between scientific and religious notions of female delinquency in a reformatory where—through a ritualized daily schedule that included laundering, spinning wool, cleaning, instruction, and catechism—a woman was domesticated by the "Good Mother" rather than her husband. **4**

Driven much more by organicist and eugenic visions of the body politic and reproduction, such supervision and scrutiny of women's activities were also critical to the reformatory project in Costa Rica. In his chapter, Steven Palmer deftly traces the genealogy of the penitentiary, medical policing, and confinement in a Central American nation known for its anomalous liberalism. While Costa Rica's central penitentiary did not reproduce the Benthamite ideal, it was an integral facet of a more far-reaching system of societal ordering and surveillance. According to Palmer, the penitentiary in the country's capital, San José, was first and foremost "a registry, holding tank, and clearinghouse of an expanded network of police surveillance of the popular classes that itself demanded a constant and fresh flow of delinquency for self-justification" (241). In the name of national prophylaxis Costa Rican health and police authorities promoted hygiene campaigns, school inspections, and responsible motherhood that took reform out of the penitentiary and into streets and homes. Rereading the Costa Rican liberal state through sanitarianism and such diffused strategies of social control suggests that while the penitentiary per se might not have been fruitfully transplanted, its modes of subjectification and classification became pivotal to state formation at large. **5**

In his chapter on labor and penal servitude in Puerto Rico, Kelvin A. Santiago-Valles also documents the failure to implement the idealized penitentiary system. Santiago-Valles provides an impressive analysis of the machinations of the Spanish Empire as its nineteenth-century decline shaped socio-economic formations in one of its last colonial strongholds. As in Brazil and Peru, although elites viewed the working classes and emancipated slaves through the prism of positivist criminology—categorizing them as savage and atavistic—the penitentiary could not become a concrete place in countries bereft of the routinized discipline of the factory. As Santiago-Valles writes, "Only by translating penal confinement into the loss of labor time/value could carceral utilitarianism be constructed, both literally, socially and semiotically" (148). **6**

This argument frames the entire anthology. As Salvatore and Aguirre posit in their introductory chapter, export economies and monetized urban labor were necessary preconditions for the operationalization of the penitentiary along Benthamite lines. Despite the profound influence of Italian and French criminologists—such as Cesare Lombroso—throughout Latin America, a reformatory akin to Elmira would not be part of Latin America's hybrid modernity. In the editors' words: "the project for the reconstruction of *Homo Economicus* could not proceed from a social imaginary dominated by images of peasants, landlords, and personal dependency" (29). **7**

This critical insight is also the volume's thorniest problem. To conceive of the penitentiary, as a cornerstone of modernity, only in terms of importation, refurbishment, success or failure occludes a series of broader patterns in which the Spanish empire helped originate many pieces of the carceral that would be remobilized and deployed in other sites and times. In *Colonizing Egypt* Timothy Mitchell suggests that "examples of the Panopticon and similar disciplinary institutions were developed and introduced in many cases not in France or England but on the colonial frontiers of Europe, in places like Russia, India, North and South America, and Egypt." (Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991], p. x.) Perhaps instead of asking how the penitentiary was repackaged according to national peculiarities, we should ask how Spanish colonialism in the Americas helped to create the penitentiary. This would involve examining two waves of knowledge-production since the first European encounters with the New World. First, the hallmark of Spanish arrival to any potential site of settlement was the geometrical grid plan that sought to instill order and tame populations in the name of church, *cabildo,* and **8**

the military. Given that Foucault's most rudimentary definition of the carceral is exactly such a grid, what were the repercussions of this spatializing modality in New Spain and Europe? Second, in the late eighteenth century, Bourbon Spain—influenced by both a sense of decreasing dominion and an Enlightenment zeal to taxonomize, stratify, and contain—promulgated stricter labor and sanitary laws, revamped their *presidios,* and established intendencies. Thinking about how these various carceral forms became modular and mobile, moving from the Americas to Europe and back again, might challenge the static signifier of "modernity" that delimits this anthology's periodization and research agenda. Nonetheless, this volume places questions of discourse, science, colonialism, surveillance, and state-formation on the map of Latin American cultural history in an original and engaging manner. More than just an initial foray into the birth of the penitentiary, this well-balanced and nuanced set of essays unlocks a new field for the gaze of Latin American(ist) scholars.

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