

Industrial & Labor Relations Review

Volume 57, Issue 2

2004

Article 90

Partners in Conflict: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950-1973

Heidi Tinsman*

*,

Copyright ©2004 by the authors. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher, bepress, which has been given certain exclusive rights by the author. *Industrial & Labor Relations Review* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview>

mately he saw education as the path to a better and more just society.

The author quotes one of Van Arsdale's closest friends who spoke with Harry just before he died:

Before he passed away, I visited him and he was in bed and he could hardly talk. He motioned me to come over to him and I pressed my ear against his mouth and he said, 'Tell me the truth. How many students do we have at the Labor College?' He knew he was dying and he wanted to know how many students there were at the College.

After more than 60 years in the labor movement, Van Arsdale died at age 80 on February 16, 1986. In a fitting tribute to a man who believed so much in education and the trade union movement, Empire State College's Center for Labor Studies, State University of New York, was renamed the Harry Van Arsdale, Jr. School of Labor Studies; and on December 5, 2001, Harry Van Arsdale, Jr. was inducted into the AFL-CIO's Labor International Hall of Fame.

This book leaves no doubt that Van Arsdale's reputation as labor's champion is well deserved. But he was more than that: he was and is a champion and role model for the entire human race—which, the author tells us, Harry often wished everyone would someday rejoin.

Thomas J. Germano

Director, Center for Labor/Management
Relations and Dispute Resolution
Dowling College
Oakdale, New York

Partners in Conflict: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950–1973. By Heidi Tinsman. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002. xviii, 367 pp. ISBN 0-8223-2922-0, \$21.95 (paper); 0-8223-2907-7, \$64.95 (cloth).

Partners in Conflict is a fascinating study of how Chile's Agrarian Reform—which in nine years (1964–73) dismantled almost half of the country's agricultural lands to peasants—affected men, women, the relations between them, and family dynamics. Focusing on the Aconcagua Valley, it combines skillful use of oral histories with statistics, ministerial records, records of church-affiliated agencies, periodicals, and judicial

records on domestic violence. Far more than a local study, it demonstrates the key importance of women and gender relations to the success of class projects of social transformation. In the author's words, the book "honors and criticizes a utopian project, some of whose goals are still in the making" (xiii). As she shows, sensibilities about social justice, solidarity, and egalitarianism did not extend to an attack on patriarchal privilege; yet the Agrarian Reform "made patriarchy easier for women to live within and negotiate" (13). In Tinsman's analysis, important legacies of the Agrarian Reform include not only union democracy and a heightened sense of worker entitlement to material benefits, but also the ideal of "gender mutualism"—harmonious cooperation between men and women within the family—which women embraced and used to the extent possible. As women entered the labor force in droves following the 1973 coup, especially in the fruit-packing industry, they called on these earlier ideals to challenge sexism in unions and at home.

In the interesting first two chapters, Tinsman focuses on how the patriarchal latifundia system of the 1950s and early 1960s simultaneously demasculinized male peasants and subordinated female peasants (and children) economically and sexually to the authority of both husbands and the patrón. It is here that she introduces and develops the most important analytical claim of the book: that "patriarchal power [is] about sexuality; particularly, but not exclusively, men's sexual authority over women" (11). Drawing on both psychoanalytical and Marxist feminist understandings of gender oppression, Tinsman maintains that the male sexual privilege guaranteed by marriage entitled men to wield authority over other aspects of women's labor and person. The lack of economic opportunities for women and their consequent material dependency on men, according to Tinsman, "presupposed women's already existing subordination to men on sexual grounds" (80). Male peasants, who suffered exploitation and humiliation as a result of their class subordination, constructed self-images as virile *huasos*: bosses of their own lives (beyond the patrón's view), heads of household with authority over dependents, and men with proven sexual prowess. Although Tinsman provides ample evidence that female peasants sought to control their fertility, protested husbands' sexual liaisons outside the home, and in extreme cases filed assault charges, the common wisdom and practice was that *el hombre manda en la casa* (the man rules in the home) (64).

The ideology and practice of patriarchy did not disappear as the latifundia were dismantled. Between 1964 and 1970, the Christian Democrats launched an agrarian reform program with the goal of transforming *inquilinos* (peasants who worked on estates in exchange for access to small plots of land) into land-owning citizens and responsible household heads. President Frei's "Revolution in Liberty," which promised to uplift and empower the poor without engendering class conflict, mobilized rural workers into unions that were explicitly masculinist. The author cites studies finding that up to 90% of men who lived and worked on rural estates in central Chile joined a union. In contrast, women made up only 6% of the membership in rural unions. Union activism in the face of landowners' intimidation demanded the assertion of manly courage, and tangible victories reinforced campesino machismo. Socializing among union members involved masculine rituals of competitive drinking, gambling, sports, and sexual boasting, which forged intergenerational and class solidarity. A new sense of class rights to set limits on landowners' authority was inextricably bound together with the demand for the right to manly respect.

If women were unwelcome as union members, they were neither irrelevant nor ignored. The logic of family solidarity drew women into class struggles through their involvement in fundraising for unions, organizing common pots to feed strikers and their families, protesting the detention of male strikers, participating in demonstrations, strikes, and land occupations, and so forth. The Agrarian Reform's family-centered goals and ideal of gender mutualism acknowledged the importance of educating women and winning their support for social transformation. To break women's isolation in the home and to create modern families that could promote national development, Frei's government established mothers' centers, youth clubs, and neighbors' councils. These organizations offered classes in which youth and women could acquire modern skills "appropriate to their sex," provided new opportunities for socializing outside the home, and mobilized women to participate in community activities, including political confrontations with the state over the provision of basic services.

Even while affirming women's agency, however, such programs were designed to enhance, not undermine, campesina domesticity and to uphold distinct, complementary gender roles. This was especially clear in Chile's first nationwide family planning program. While it gave

married women the means to exercise greater control over their bodies and legitimated their attempts to set conditions and limits on male demands for conjugal sex, it affirmed the principle of husbands' responsibility for family planning as an extension of their rights as heads of household.

Tinsman's analysis of land distribution focuses not only on the considerable material benefits received by rural workers, but also on the creation of divisions and strengthening of hierarchies among the peasantry. By 1970, only 10–15% of agricultural workers in Aconcagua and the nation had been invited to join *asentamientos* (nationalized properties formally held by the state but farmed and administered by former workers who would vote after four to six years on whether to form collective, cooperative, or individual properties). The beneficiaries (*asentados*), who were required to be household heads with significant prior agricultural experience, were almost exclusively male. Their access to abundant new resources boosted their sense of masculine achievement and autonomy and placed them in a position to hire seasonal workers. Not only did this create new hierarchies among men, but it also reinforced popular patriarchy. *Asentados* who provided better housing and higher living standards for their families consolidated their economic and sexual power over dependent wives. Hence the state helped to institutionalize an ideal of female domesticity that outlasted the Frei government.

The victory of Popular Unity (UP) in 1970 brought an acceleration and deepening of the Agrarian Reform along with a visionary platform to emancipate women, transforming them into workers, leaders, and protagonists in the process of social change. The CERAs (Agrarian Reform Centers), which replaced *asentamientos*, included female workers and housewives, youths over sixteen, and seasonal workers as full voting members. Few women actually participated, however, given their unrelieved burden of domestic responsibilities and overwhelming male opposition. Acknowledging the sexual nature of women's subordination, UP expanded gynecological and contraceptive services and designed candid sex education programs that upheld women's right to sexual fulfillment. And yet UP's maternalist policies and Allende's paternalist praise for women's wifely and motherly qualities revealed strong continuities with Christian Democratic approaches. Caught between the contradiction of promising both women's equality and defense of the fam-

ily, UP's bold policies had disappointing results. Men, whose support for the Agrarian Reform lay in its rehabilitation of masculinity as well as its promise of class uplift, remained the UP model of the revolutionary worker-citizen.

In the final chapter, Tinsman contests the conventional wisdom that Chilean women were hostile to UP, either because of their innate conservatism and religiosity or because the Agrarian Reform purportedly ignored women. The book convincingly demonstrates that none of these claims was true in Aconcagua. Rather, peasant women, who reaped considerable material benefits from the Agrarian Reform, provided a solid base of support for UP. If they were more ambivalent about the UP project than were men of their class, Tinsman argues that this had nothing to do with innate conservatism, or religiosity. Instead, while the Agrarian Reform validated women's contributions to society and upheld an ideal of gender mutualism, it simultaneously bolstered men's economic and sexual authority over women. During the Popular Unity years, escalating class conflict and bitter party factionalism absorbed peasant men's energies and demanded new levels of male combativeness. This, together with greater oppor-

tunities to travel and to engage in sexual promiscuity, undermined men's economic and social commitments to their families. Peasant women, who were largely excluded from participation in these conflicts, experienced a sense of physical abandonment as well as vulnerability in the face of consumer shortages. Because family life remained central to their survival, their own sense of authority was eroded when class conflict jeopardized conjugal relations and networks of female reciprocity.

Tinsman's pioneering study recasts our understanding of the dilemmas of the Agrarian Reform in Chile. Through skillful use of oral histories and records of domestic conflict, she shows that men's and women's views of the Agrarian Reform were as much shaped by its unequal effects on their personal, family lives as on their occupational status and public roles. Her book demonstrates the inextricable links between the private and public spheres and the centrality of sexuality for understanding the process and effects of revolutionary projects.

Susan K. Besse

Associate Professor of History
City College, CUNY