

Book Review

– *Sex and love in Porfirian Mexico City: A social history of working-class courtship*, by Michael Matthews. University of Florida Press, 2025

In *Sex and love in Porfirian Mexico City: A social history of working-class courtship*, historian Michael Matthews, over the course of six chapters, marshals a rich set of archival materials culled from newspaper repositories in Mexico City as well as Mexico’s Supreme Court archive to provide a “social history of lower-class sexual life in and around Mexico’s capital at the turn of the century” (6). As the author proposes, this is particularly important given that “relatively little has been written on the sexual mores and practices of the inhabitants of Porfirian Mexico City” (p. 7). Indeed, the so-called Porfiriato (1876-1911) – when strongman Porfirio Díaz led the nation through a moment of urbanisation, industrialisation, and modernisation – remains a somewhat understudied moment in North America. Matthews’s study challenges the idea that the working classes held fast to traditional notions of sex and love: “their words and actions reveal a culture of courtship, romance, and sex that could be ambivalent toward a wide range of norms such as honour, shame, marriage, love, and female chastity” (p. 7). Such views, Matthews contends, were essentially a product of the respective material and social conditions that humbler classes faced: they “lived lives more sexually liberated than those of their social higher-ups” (p. 12). Matthews’ text evinces an unwavering commitment to find real-life stories of Mexico City’s sizable young adult population – particularly, the city’s inchoate industrial proletariat, its domestic workers, street sweepers, sweatshop labourers, and self-employed market vendors, among others. It is not difficult to see Matthews’ study as inspired by E. P. Thompson’s classic *The making of the English working class*; that the comparison even comes to mind is no small compliment.

With Chapter 1, Matthews demonstrates how the transformed realities of Mexico City under Díaz – modernisation and industrialisation – altered individuals’ choices in terms of their affective lives. Leading readers down the grimy alleyways, through the rancid-smelling cantinas, and into the flophouses of Mexico’s monstrous capital city, Matthews recounts both the dangers and delights of Porfirian society. With Díaz’s Mexico, industrial and urban relations of production unfettered individuals from traditional moral codes. Industrialisation

primarily “served to shift daughters’ balance of power within the family and promoted their personal freedom and sexual openness” (p. 39). New urban spaces, in turn, granted opportunities for semi-clandestine meetings. Astutely, Matthews’s study also problematizes traditional opinions of prostitution, given that “the need for varied financial streams to support economic survival blurred the lines between committed relationships and sex for hire” (p. 168).

Chapter 2 is wonderfully Foucauldian in timbre, showing how the “state’s capacity to surveil, detain, and adjudicate manifested itself in the instances when residents called on legal authorities to arbitrate matters of courtship and inter-generational conflict” (p. 57). In short, Matthews’s close archival research never loses sight of the French philosopher’s famed axiom that “Where there is power, there is resistance.” Throughout *Sex and love*, Matthews unlocks the secrets of romantic and sexual experiences by delving into an unfathomable number (234!) of *rapto* and *estupro* cases from residents in and around Mexico City. While *rapto* constitutes “the abduction of underage women from parental authority”, *estupro* is defined as “the initiation of sexual relations with underage women” (p. 65). Ultimately, they provide Matthews a wealth of information about the limits of the law in Porfirian Mexico. Matthews convincingly argues that men – but especially, women – rather than suffering lackadaisically under the weight of authoritarian moral codes, often “adapt[ed] state power, its agents, and its apparatus to their advantage” (p. 84). Matthews shows how women, having been tempted into sexual relations with the promise of marriage, later leveraged the charge of rape to force their lovers’ hand in nuptials.

Chapter 3 illustrates how the Porfiriato – an immensely significant period for changes in Mexican law – often teetered between liberalism and colonial legacies. In the courts, women were often left at a disadvantage. The category of “will” was particularly contentious in the judicial system; Matthews proposes that when “openly exercised personal will, judges most often viewed them as accomplices in their own abductions” (p. 92). Effectively, men found it far more advantageous than women to appeal to the notion of “will” within court proceedings related to abductions, elopements, etc. With both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, Matthews finesses the archive to detail the variety of relationships in Porfirian Mexico, whether permanent, temporary or fleeting. Against stereotypes of Mexican women, Matthews finds many cases of women enjoying casual sex and evincing ambivalence toward marriage. Most interestingly, the author considers that “working-class Mexicans chose *amasiato* – long-term consensual unions – as the most common form of cohabitation” (115). Chapter 5 illustrates how the humbler classes used “sex strategically in the hope of improving their financial or social lots” (p. 144). Particularly intriguing here is the section on *mala vida* – cases of young women who elope to flee abuse in their parental household.

With the final chapter, Matthews’s analysis is partially stymied by distinctions that feel somewhat Manichean. At issue is Matthews’s definition of the penny press, as well as his claim that embourgeoisement necessarily implied a movement toward conservative values. Did conservative values always come

from above while liberal values flow up from society's lower rung? Scholars like Kari Soriano Salkjelsvik have recently explored conservatism in nineteenth-century Latin America, pointing out that we need not accept the facile but celebratory reading of Porfirian *científicos* as bellwethers of progress and liberal values; nor should we let lower classes off the hook for their ideological misidentifications.

Although Matthews's study could have tied together these few loose ends, it is a solid social history of Porfirian Mexico's legal engagement with amorous entanglements, and a necessary read for scholars of the Porfiriato. The book will be crucial to those cultural and literary critics who situate their analyses in the lived social world. Ultimately, the study should appeal to a broad audience of Latin Americanists across disciplines, particularly those who think deeply about intergenerational conflict, family life, gendered norms, spousal choices, and economic needs.

Kevin M. Anzzolin, Christopher Newport University
kevin.anzzolin@cnu.edu