

Book Review/Reseña

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***La ley del Mbaraté: Masculinidad y discurso político durante la dictadura stronista.* By Jazmín Duarte Sckell. Asunción: Editorial Tiempo de Historia, 2024. Pp. 251. Illustrations, notes, bibliography.**

Historical sociologist Jazmín Duarte Sckell explores political language during the Stroessner dictatorship in Paraguay (1954–1989) in her intriguing study, *La ley del Mbaraté*. The work jives well with literature about the era. For example, author Mario Castells captures a moment of banal authoritarian politics in a rural household in southern Paraguay during the late 1970s. The scene unfolds in his semi-autobiographical novel, *El mosto y la queresa* (2012), which follows the antics of the narrator’s petulant older brother, Emigido Rivarola.

A household radio literally amplifies the mundane political-cultural dynamics at work. Romantic polka songs played during the morning move the narrator’s mother to sway in longing for her late husband while grinding maize. In the afternoons, the daily broadcast of the polka “General Stroessner” conjures for the narrator the rhetorical power of one of its Guaraní-language refrains. The verse celebrates the persecution of regime enemies denigrated as *ava tie’ÿ* (wicked Indians) who had betrayed *ñane retã* (our nation, our republic). “It was a verse of virile force,” the narrator recounts, “a magical verse that demanded a display of strength and patriotism. Every time it was sung, one wanted to be part of that historic thrashing.”

Instead, the radio malfunctions and exacerbates sibling rivalries. The spoiled Emigido blames his sister for watering household plants too close to the appliance. The sister, Chiní—who “lived angry that our brother never helped in the fields”—accepts blame for the malfunction if only to goad Emigido, who then pleads with the mother to let him make an expensive trip to Pilar (the district capital) to get the radio fixed. Chiní insists that they just take the radio to a local handyman. Emigido screams back: “What is that black fisherman going to be able to fix anyway?” Emigido, of course, wins over the mother who gives him the money to go to Pilar.

Duarte Sckell's work *La ley del Mbaraté* allows us to see the penetrating significance of scenes like that captured by Mario Castells. In the scene, gendered and racialized discourse not only promotes affective attachments to the Stroessner regime, with imagined exercises of violence against political enemies to boot, it also factors into the distribution of labor burdens and privilege in the household. Emigido embodies within his household *la ley del mbaraté*, the law of the impetuous, blustering strongman.

Duarte Sckell demonstrates how this customary "law"—and its corresponding gendered discursive matrix—operated in the Paraguayan republic writ large during the Stroessner regime. On cue her book opens with discussion of another popular polka that adulated the general and reached radios across the Paraguayan countryside.

Duarte Sckell's book centers though on an earlier curious moment in the regime's history. Women had gained formal suffrage in 1963. Then, by 1967, the regime called for a constituent assembly to rewrite the country's 1940 constitution along, putatively, more democratic foundations. Opposition parties were invited to participate alongside the ruling Colorado Party. The opposition parties actively campaigned in electoral contests and published newspapers and pamphlets. It was a promising democratic opening, however brief, and done under the pall of a perpetual state of siege and active repression that smothered more radical political expressions. Duarte Sckell perceptively recognizes the value of examining, via a gendered analysis, the impressive volume of published discourse across a relatively wide political spectrum during this curious democratic legitimacy grab of the late 1960s.

Duarte Sckell conducts a broad taxonomy of its discursive production and lands on an incisive pillar of argumentation: that the opposition never broke free from the discursive matrix of the regime and its definitions of moral authority, political agency, and masculine valor. That is, they never broke free from *la ley del mbaraté*. For sure, sharp critique of the regime flowed across the pages of opposition newspapers and publications. Even President Stroessner was the object of an occasional barb, although this was done carefully. Mostly underling regime operatives and the Colorado Party drew the attacks.

Accusations of human rights abuses, corruption, lawless exercises of power, and feckless servility populated the editorials and political cartoons, the latter of which often featured jocular dialogue in Guaraní to accompany the images. The indicated vices comprise the taxonomy driving Duarte Sckell's own analysis, and she details how competing factions of the Liberal Party as well as the leftist Febreristas and the Christian Social Democrats all partook in the exchange.

The ruling Colorado Party also had their say, of course, and Duarte Sckell examines how they too addressed such themes in official organs while pumping praise for the modernizing potential of the regime. Here is where the significance of *la ley del mbaraté* registered intriguing slippage. *Mbaraté* means “strength” or “power” in Guaraní—with all sorts of masculine attributes attached in its connotative application—an image that the regime indeed cultivated in popular culture, as referenced above. But the expression *la ley del mbaraté* also connoted the arbitrary exercise of power via extralegal means and worked as a cultural-rhetorical lynchpin linking the persecution of dissidents, torture, abuse, craven sycophancy, bribery rackets, bluster, nepotism, and shameless social climbing and illicit enrichment by otherwise brutish, uneducated party operatives. It evoked in essence the pervasive derogatory caricature of the Colorado Party official serving the dictatorship.

The caricature stung because it landed close to the truth and contrasted sharply with the ruling party’s self-image as a free association of upstanding citizens and a force for democracy in the world. Even so, the charge retained an abstract quality among the opposition forces deploying it—again, rarely was the top general-president himself targeted—and Liberals were just as prone to sling such charges against intraparty rivals. And if any regime loyalists were named, they were often influential women with ties to the Colorado Party apparatus playing the role of the *patrona mbaraté*. The perceived transgression in these instances: women, by exercising the law of *mbaraté*, violated gendered expectations. Only men could be strongmen and accrue those sly winks of admiration for brazen acts that also fired everyone’s outrage.

Fellow scholars who aim to deepen our understanding of this formative Cold War-era right-wing authoritarian regime should consult Duarte Sckell’s work to understand its gendered dimensions of power first and foremost. The rampant quotation of the discourse under examination—while tiring for readers anxious for more analytical framing from the author—supply a trove with which to do additional work. At the very least the book provides empirical-historical context for countless Paraguayans who grew up during the dictatorship, or even during its aftermath, listening to those polkas and arguing with siblings and imbibing the language of *la ley del mbaraté* in the air.

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