

Julia Rodriguez's *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State*

Carlos Zuñiga-Nieto | Columbia University

Rodriguez, Julia. *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xii + 306 pp. Ill. \$59.95 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper).



Julia Rodriguez traces the intersection between medicine, science, and state formation in Argentina during the so-called “golden era,” which lasted from 1880 to 1914. She convincingly argues that emerging tensions, conflicts, and contradictions during the country’s struggle for “civilization” through science laid the foundation for statehood. Moreover, she argues that these struggles continued during the pre-World War I period and the rise of authoritarianism in the 20th century. In privileging her analysis of the role of science and medicine, the author contextualizes Argentina’s experience within the global movements towards nation-building. Rodriguez discusses citizenship, identity, crime, and public health, contributing to a rich historiography that includes the work of Diego Armus, Kristin Ruggiero, Donna Guy, and Nancy Leis Stepan, to name just a few. By analyzing the intersection between scientists’ and policymakers’ efforts to create a modern civilization, Rodriguez’s central argument of continuity captures the contradictions of liberalism and positivism. She maintains that immigration policy, social/medical pathologies such as crime and insanity, and methods of social control and violence were the unintended consequences of liberal state formation.

The book is organized into three sections: “Symptoms,” “Diagnosis,” and “Hygiene,” where Rodriguez draws connections between scientific discourses that were utilized to implement mechanisms of social control. First, the author analyzes how liberal intellectuals of the Generation of 1880 responded to a diverse and urban society by treating disorders as a social illness and

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embracing positivism to combat the threat of the urban masses. These intellectuals included physicians, hygienists, and state officials such as José Ingenieros, Francisco de Veyga, José María Ramos Mejía, Emilio Coni, Eduardo Wilde, and Juan Vucetich. The “Diagnosis” section examines Argentine criminologists’ efforts to classify criminals and the mentally ill, showing how racial assumptions informed criminological thought. This was noted in the author’s analysis of the 1909 assassination of the police chief Ramón Falcón by Simon Radowsky, a young anarchist (90). This event stimulated social pathologists to alter their views regarding immigration. While European immigration had been considered as an alternative to improve the race, Radowsky’s actions brought fear to the political and scientific establishment. Members began to view anarchist violence as detrimental and a violent threat to the status quo. The last section of the book provides a compelling discussion of how the transition from the Catholic Church’s controlling practices to the primacy of science and medicine continued to position the family and traditional gender roles as the foundation of a civilized society.

Rodriguez’s strongest contribution to Argentine historiography is her discussion of the development of criminology and its influence in establishing the contours of political citizenship in liberal states. Rodriguez draws on her analysis of the uncatalogued papers from the Juan Vucetich Archive in the city of La Plata in her discussion of the state obsession with “dactyloscopy,” or fingerprinting. She argues that this technique was used as a means to monitor the population. The government sought to extend the system to include both criminals and the general population in the form of national identity cards and mandatory registration for students and employees (242). The author expands the reader’s knowledge of state formation by making connections between methods of social control and the debates regarding the shifting boundaries of citizenship. As analyzed by the author, social control and discourses of science and medicine intersected with norms of citizenship. Moreover, the state found it difficult to control the immigrant population in the country, and officials sought to exclude the masses from the privileges of citizenship. This trend is evident in the hurdles proposed by officials to make citizenship difficult. Such plans include Lucas Ayarragaray’s 1908 plan to require 10 years’ residence before naturalization, or Cayetano Carbonell’s proposed requirement of five years’ residency before citizenship.

Although the book provides a limited discussion of the intersection of science and law in defining citizenship and fitness for political participation, Rodriguez has raised the possibility for comparisons with other countries in the Americas. While her thesis of continuity of medical metaphors to justify repressive and authoritarian practices will certainly raise debate among historians and students, Rodriguez has written a book containing provocative arguments, conclusions, and empirical research that posits nation-building within the analytical framework of medicine and science. As evidenced in Rodriguez’s book, liberal state formation in the Americas was not a process of equality, political participation, and universal notions of citizenship, but one in which government officials and scientists produced and reproduced inequalities as they sought to exclude the majority of the population and establish rigid

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definitions of citizenship.

Carlos Zuniga-Nieto es estudiante de doctorado en Historia de América Latina en la Universidad de Columbia. Tiene una maestría en Historia de la Universidad de Columbia. Su tesis de maestría, "Fostering Ties in the Porfirian City: Friendships and Sociability in the Tepito Neighborhood, 1890-1910" examina la formación de parentesco, las redes sociales, y las interacciones sociales entre los habitantes del barrio de Tepito en la ciudad de México durante el Porfiriato. Sus proyectos de investigación incluyen la cultura de los jóvenes, género, sexualidad, y la vida cotidiana en las ciudades de Latino América del fin del siglo XIX y del siglo XX.