

*The Politics of Sexuality  
in Latin America:  
A Reader on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,  
and Transgender Rights*

Edited by Javier Corrales and Mario Pecheny.

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Scholars of Latin American politics have directed considerable attention to the inclusion of marginalized societal actors, particularly workers, peasants, indigenous peoples, and women. This attention to inclusion, however, has ignored the political struggles of lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender (LGBT) citizens in Latin America. While recent volumes acknowledge that “post-material values” and mobilization around identity have emerged in contemporary Latin American politics, the primary focus remains on class and “material interests.”<sup>1</sup>

Javier Corrales and Mario Pecheny correct this omission in their sweeping and incisive edited volume. This book brings the tools of political science – namely, analysis of social movements and policy change – to bear on the question of LGBT political inclusion. Including reprints of published articles as well as new research, the volume draws on an impressive repertoire of literature, film, survey research, case studies, ethnography, and textual analysis of legal documents to paint a picture of the social and political dynamics that LGBT groups navigate. In impressively representing the whole region – from the Caribbean to Argentina – the book exhibits remarkable balance with respect to representation of gays, lesbians, and transgendered citizens.

A central question is explaining why LGBT movements fail to emerge. In the introductory chapter, Corrales and Pecheny highlight the vexing problems facing LGBT political organization in Latin America. Since the LGBT community is small,

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movements cannot rely on a mass base. The problem of size is exacerbated by the multiplicity of groups (gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, transvestite, and intersexual) with different interests that face a formidable collective action dilemma. On the one hand, there is the question of identity: how to make identity coherent, inclusive, and visible. There is the omnipresent closet, which at once provides a safe haven for sexual freedom and constrains the LGBT movement's political clout. On the other, there is the question of family, and how social institutions stigmatize and silence expressions of "other" sexual identities. Moreover, the continued salience of material interests – specifically, economic issues – pushes LGBT rights far down on the political agenda. As a result, many individuals who could form the basis of a broader LGBT movement choose instead to immigrate to more tolerant nations, maintain a low profile, or remain closeted.

This book makes a number of important contributions. First, the book sets the right tone. The volume avoids the impenetrable language of postmodernism so often used in the study of "queer" politics, a language that risks alienating the reader as much as the subjects it purports to represent. While the editors self-consciously write to an activist audience concerned with LGBT rights, they avoid the quagmires of self-righteousness and political correctness that can make this type of edited volume tedious to read. While acknowledging the shocking level of discrimination against LGBT citizens, the book's tone remains optimistic and hopeful about future achievements.

Second, the volume successfully moves beyond the "culture war." While it looks at the struggle between LGBT movements and the religious right, it aims to engage "big" questions in the social sciences. By directly looking at social movements, left politics, democratic governance, and public policy, the authors make LGBT rights mobilization in Latin America relevant to scholars who know little about this topic. For example, as scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding Latin America's "left-turn," the case of LGBT rights provides a fascinating window into cleavages and tensions within the left, as the "old" and "new" lefts grapple with the questions of gender, identity, and inclusiveness.

Third, the authors succeed at speaking directly to both professional, academic audiences as well as activist, non-academic audiences. The editors offer strategic suggestions to LGBT movements. They caution against the strategic pitfall of the "shock effect," in which movement leaders galvanize their movements by mobilizing around vile hate crimes or the staggering scope of the AIDS pandemic. They also warn of the "paradox of success," and encourage activists to remain vigilant of declining mobilization after achieving small victories, in order to maintain LGBT issues at the top of the political agenda. Conveying analytic rigor and a passion for social change, this book stands as an exemplar of activist-scholarship.

Though the entire volume provides a detailed panorama of LGBT politics, several chapters stand out. Millie Thayer's chapter poses a nice empirical puzzle which centers on explaining the different strategies – creating community versus demanding social integration – adopted by Lesbian movements in Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Rafael de la Dehesa's chapter, which addresses the familiar dilemma of LGBT movement

participation in electoral politics in Brazil and Mexico, presents a nuanced account of how movements weigh losses in autonomy against gains in partisan representation. Finally, Scott Larson's chapter on gay spaces in Havana, Cuba promises an ardent journey through the nocturnal, gay establishments in the old and new Havana.

In spite of its important contributions, the book is not without problems. The authors could do a better job conceptualizing and measuring landmark political victories towards the achievement of an inclusive political community that fully confers political rights to LGBT citizens. While the book offers a time line that charts major events in the LGBT struggle, it is difficult to distinguish small scale events from major, substantive victories. Providing a clearer framework for coding successes and setbacks might clarify the direction and magnitude of change. Such a framework could help analysts to chart regional and sub-national variation.

Moreover, while the editors promise to correct for the inattention towards LGBT politics in political science, much of the emphasis in this volume is on the social rather than the political. The volume could have addressed the lack of attention to the role of the state in much of this literature. For example, weak state capacity may render much of the discussion of Napoleonic legal codes that decriminalized sodomy in the nineteenth century irrelevant, since the rule of law is weak and unevenly applied. This inattention to the role of state could be corrected through more explicit engagement with feminist theory and gender scholarship.

Third, some readers may yearn for more comparative case studies. In this regard, explicit comparisons between middle-income Latin American countries and Spain could be productive, given similar Iberian cultural heritages yet stark differences with respect to policies towards LGBT citizens. The case of Spain suggests that processes of diffusion and regional integration may be important mechanisms for expanding LGBT rights.

These shortcomings are minor quibbles in comparison to the many virtues of this volume. Corrales, Pecheny, and their collaborators succeed at making an argument that studying LGBT politics, using the analytic tools of political science, is a promising research agenda that deserves greater attention from *all* scholars—those who self-consciously identify with the LGBT community as well as those who do not. This volume represents a major step toward making LGBT rights a central question in studies of democratization. ■

– David Bagueño and Deirdre Shannon served as lead editors of this book review.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Ruth Berins Collier and Samuel Handlin, ed., *Reorganizing Popular Politics: Participation and the New Interest Regime in Latin America* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).