
Fin de Siècle Sexuality

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A positivist approach to the study of sexuality in Latin America in the fin de siècle period (c. 1880–1920) in which practices determined to be deviant were subject to reform in the name of national progress.

In Latin America, the decades between 1880 and 1920 represent a period of dramatic demographic, cultural, and political change. It was during this time that technological advances along with increased investment in infrastructure and communication led many nations to enjoy unprecedented economic growth. But this growth was often uneven, benefiting the traditional landed elite and entrenching divisions between the rich and the poor. Issues such as the (over)exploitation of natural resources, poor working conditions, and rapid urbanization affected vast swaths of the population. At the same time, the growing middle class sought greater political representation in countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, while indigenous movements in Peru, Bolivia, and Mexico sought to gain a voice in national affairs. Socialist organizations were formed to advocate for better working conditions for disenfranchised populations, while anarchist groups sought to completely restructure social and economic relations. The Spanish-American War (1898) marked a paradigm shift in regional power dynamics, with the United States exerting ever-greater influence. The Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) sought a redistribution of land for peasants and indigenous communities. In this context, the notion of “progress” for Latin American nations became central to cultural, political, and economic policies. This ideology of progress was buoyed by a shift toward positivist science and increased interest in managing diverse and growing populations.

The study of sexuality in the fin de siècle period should be understood in relation to the aspiration, held by most Latin American nations, to control population growth. Leading politicians argued that for nations to modernize they had to know the precise makeup of their populations in addition to their sexual habits. Across Latin America, but particularly in countries with large immigrant communities such as Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, demographic control was aimed at “whitening” the national population. Intellectual leaders often conflated the behaviors that were attributed to white European

immigrants, such as industry, work ethic, and morality, with whiteness itself. Latin American nations sponsored new methods of scientific inquiry, such as demography, social psychology, criminology, and public hygiene (known as hygienics), not only to promote a whiter and thus more “modern” populace but also to discover and potentially cure what was called at the time “sexual perversion.” Any form of sexuality (such as homosexuality) or gender variance (such as transvestism) that was thought to detract from the overarching goal of promoting the national cause was seen as pathological and dangerous, and nations sought to reform these “deviant” practices in the name of progress. While the influence and application of scientific approaches (known as positivism) to sexual difference was ubiquitous across cultural and political lines, not all spheres of society engaged with this difference in the same way. The following sections describe major conceptual debates in fin de siècle Latin America around the role that sexuality should play in science, politics, literature, art, and culture.

Positivism and Sexuality

At its core, positivism can be understood as a set of beliefs meant to promote a country’s social, political, and economic advancement by privileging the scientific method. As a philosophy, positivism discounts as unknowable anything that an individual is unable to observe in the natural world. Scientific principles were applied to politics and economics, as well as to social relations and art, all of which had profound implications for the politics of gender and sexuality. In Latin America, intellectuals such as Justo Sierra (Mexico), José María Samper (Colombia), and José Ingenieros (Argentina) adapted ideas from the prominent European philosophers Auguste Comte, Gustave Le Bon, and Herbert Spencer to develop models of education and public policy that privileged scientific observation over metaphysics or religious doctrine. In particular, the concept of social evolution came to bear on how these intellectuals sought to promote the development of Latin American nations.

Variations existed across Latin America, but as a whole, these new theories of scientific inquiry allowed the intellectual elite to justify attempts to retain control of land, politics, and economics, as well as to promote a heterosexual citizenry. Positivism became a way to determine which types of sexual practices would promote progress and which would lead to “degeneracy.” The fear of social and ethnic regression—degeneracy—was inspired by the work of the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso and focused on populations that did not fit the normative model of social and sexual identity. In this way, homosexuality, cross-dressing, and gender variance all became crucial objects of study for social pathologists and criminologists. Detailed case studies, reform programs,

and invasive therapeutic techniques became commonplace across Latin America during this period. Given the interest of national leaders in managing local populations, positivist science came to represent the central tool in identifying those who might diverge from the heterosexual norm.

Case Study: Argentina

In Argentina at the turn of the century the central concern of government officials was how to incorporate into a cohesive national culture the massive influx of largely European immigrants that arrived during this period. Rapid economic expansion, based particularly on bovine and grain exports, had turned Argentina into one of the wealthiest countries in the region. Leading politicians such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Juan Bautista Alberdi argued that immigrants were needed to populate land expropriated from indigenous communities and to provide labor for developing industrial economies. By 1914, 30 percent of the national population was foreign born, most coming from Italy and Spain. The capital, Buenos Aires, became a cosmopolitan city with a burgeoning middle class. Despite this economic growth, however, social tensions persisted between recent immigrants and those of generations past.

In both the social sciences and literature this tension was consistently attributed to recent immigrants and their supposed unwillingness to adapt to the Argentine culture. Sexual deviance was one of the principal characteristics attributed to many of these immigrants, and criminologists, social pathologists, writers, and politicians sought to construct a detailed taxonomy of the various forms of sexuality that might prove detrimental to the future of the country. Politicians feared the inversion of gender roles, as well as the possibility that the existing class structure, which concentrated power and wealth in the hands of a small group of traditional landholding families, would be upended. Key social scientists of this period include the physician Jose María Ramos Mejía (1849–1914), the forensic psychiatrist Francisco de Veyga (1866–1948), the psychiatrist José Ingenieros (1877–1925), and the sociologist Carlos Octavio Bunge (1875–1918), whose work focused on explaining supposedly abnormal behavior—both sexual and cultural—so that it might be purged from the national body. This preoccupation with cultural assimilation and sexual deviance led to the invention and scrutiny of figures such as the *invertido* (sexual invert), *uranista* (homosexual), *pederasta* (pederast), *tribadista* (tribadist; what today would be called a lesbian), and *tercer sexo* (third sex). It is important to note that in Argentina in the first decade of the twentieth century neither cross-dressing nor homosexual erotic practices were prohibited by civil or criminal codes. However,

physicians and psychiatrists would often appeal to police in an effort to “prevent” public scandal or a crime yet to be committed by sexual “deviants,” who would be arrested preemptively and turned over to positivist scientists for examination. The resulting case studies were published in prestigious journals such as *Archivos de psiquiatría, criminología y ciencias afines* (Archives of psychiatry, criminology, and like sciences) and *Revista argentina de ciencias políticas* (Argentine journal of political science) and were often sponsored by the Argentine government, giving criminologists of the period a significant role in the process of shaping and reforming the national population.

In the case of men, these studies did not necessarily stigmatize homoerotic practices per se, but rather the particular role in sexual activity that was adopted by an individual. The distinction between “active” (insertive) and “passive” (receptive) sexual activity in men was crucial. Thus, in Argentina what most worried social scientists was the betrayal of the stereotypical role of men as active partners in sexual relations. The adoption of the passive role, called “sexual inversion,” particularly when accompanied by a shift in gender presentation or cross-dressing, was especially vexing for the Argentine elite. For example, de Veyga’s 1903 study of Aurora, a transvestite and “professional invert” (prostitute), describes the subject as having a long criminal history, and notes that in fact “it is frequent, or better yet the rule, that a professional invert be a criminal in the same way as ‘Aurora’” (199; translated by Joseph M. Pierce). This sexual abnormality, for de Veyga, was the product of mental weakness and economic need rather than genetics. Aurora’s “inversion” was attributed to an insalubrious lifestyle, a lack of intellectual development, and a tendency toward criminality.

In the case of women, physicians and criminologists used the term *third sex* as a sexual category to refer to those who entered the labor force and became economically independent from men. The early feminist movement in the region had to negotiate long-standing political and social opposition to women’s freedom and rights, and only in the early years of the twentieth century did questions of gender relations and women’s rights come to the fore. On the one hand, socialist politics found room in its platform to advocate for labor reforms and the juridical emancipation of women. On the other, middle- and upper-class women invested in the feminist cause often relied on conservative appeals to maternity and liberal notions of civic equality under the law. The development of Argentina’s education system—in particular the *escuelas normales* (normal schools) that trained young teachers (they are usually called teachers colleges in English)—led to more opportunities for women. However, these educational centers were often regarded as dangerous for their potential to incite women to homosexuality. Enclosed spaces such as the convent and the normal

INVERTIDO AND PEDERASTA

In Latin America during the fin de siècle period, two key figures emerged as objects of scientific study for criminologists and social psychologists: the *pederasta* (pederast) and the *invertido* (invert). Replacing earlier terms such as *sodomita* (sodomite) or *uranista* (uranian), which were adapted from European sexology, *pederasta* and *invertido* preceded the contemporary use of “homosexual” and were deployed in similar though not identical ways. While scientists distinguished between active (insertive) and passive (receptive) pederasty, they did not always connect these sexual acts to a particular gender identity. *Invertido*, in contrast, referred to what scientists saw as a form of sexual and mental inversion that typically involved a cross-dressed (male-to-female) subject, often associated with prostitution. Criminologists stigmatized both as morally corrupt, but the *invertido* was seen as particularly dangerous because he feminized—that is, inverted—his physical appearance, dress, and mode of speech, thus transgressing his biological sex in the eyes of the scientific community. The central question that scientists asked was whether these subjects were products of the surrounding environment or the result of some “corrupt” genetic trait.

For example, the Cuban physician and anthropologist Luis Montané (1849–1936) published a study in *El progreso médico* in 1890 analyzing the mental and physical characteristics of twenty-one *pederastas* who had been arrested by the Cuban police. He first made a distinction between “aficionados” (aficionados)—that is, those who sought sexual satisfaction with men and paid for that service—and “prostituidos” (prostituted), which were those who made a living by selling their bodies as *pederastas*. Montané describes the mental state of the *prostituidos* as nervous and narcissistic and cites the French medical doctor and forensic scientist Auguste Ambroise Tardieu (1818–1879) to characterize their appearance as “strange, repugnant, and suspicious” (62; translated by Joseph M. Pierce). The Cuban differentiated between active and passive pederasty, concluding that there is no definitive correlation between passive sexual activity and an outwardly feminine gender presentation. However, following the work of the European sexologists Armand Goubaux, François Carlier, and M. Henri Marx, he did find that passive pederasts can be identified by examining the dilation and shape of the anus, something he calls of great value for the scientific community. For active pederasts,

school—spaces in which women exercised a modicum of independence from men—became suspicious in the eyes of social pathologists, whose interest in maintaining traditional gender roles led them to criticize early feminism and to associate outspoken women with anarchism and social decay.

In Argentina, the central question for social scientists was whether sexual deviance was congenital (innate) or acquired (environmental). Most tended to blame circumstance or economic need. (As noted above, some inverts were described as “professional,” supporting themselves through prostitution.) Physicians and psychiatrists thought that early detection and strong (i.e., traditional) educational programs could prevent or reverse acquired sexual deviance. This approach contrasted with that taken toward congenital homosexuality, which, following European sexology, was seen as incurable. In this way, criminologists and social pathologists worked in tandem with national educators to identify what they deemed to be the dangerous but preventable social phenomenon of acquired homosexuality. Ramos Mejía, de Veyga, and Ingenieros championed the cause of reform in both men and women, which they consistently attributed to the

influence of foreign ideas and people (immigrants). In his 1899 study *Las multitudes argentinas* (The Argentine multitudes), for example, Ramos Mejía described recent immigrants (*guarangos* [the uncouth]) as biologically underdeveloped, adding that they “are like the inverts of sexual instinct who reveal their dubious potential for the bilious manifestation of appetites” ([1899] 1977, 214; translated by Joseph M. Pierce). Thus, positivist discourse in Argentina linked foreignness to the potential for both sexual and cultural inversion, and social scientists sought to incarcerate and reeducate those deemed to have acquired “deviant” behaviors.

Case Study: Mexico

The issue of homosexuality came to the fore in Mexico in November 1901 when forty-one men were surprised and arrested by the police at a private home where they were holding a drag ball. Some were dressed as women, wearing elegant gowns, wigs, and makeup, whereas others wore typically masculine suits. They were tried quickly and sentenced to work with the military on the Yucatan Peninsula in order to be “rehabilitated.” This scandalous episode came to be known as El Baile de los 41 (The

Montané examined the volume and appearance of the penis, finding no clearly identifiable marker in those subjects. Thus, the search for scientific certainty regarding sexual deviance often involved invasive examinations that yielded unsatisfying and ambiguous results.

Another example was published by the Argentine physician Francisco de Veyga (1866–1948) in 1903 in *Archivos de psiquiatría, criminología y ciencias afines* (Archives of psychiatry, criminology, and like sciences). He describes a case of *inversión sexual adquirida* (acquired sexual inversion) in which, according to de Veyga, a wealthy Argentine man suffered a mental breakdown and because of this is shunned by his friends and family. He spent his days in local brothels where eventually, according to de Veyga, a *marica* (faggot), defined by the physician as a *paranóico invertido* (paranoid invert), invited him to a party (207). There he found the attention that he had been lacking at home among the attending *invertidos*, and he eventually decided that he would like to become one. He abandoned his previous family and began a new life with a man who fell in love with him as an *invertido*. Even more alarming for de Veyga, however, this subject did not shy away from society but rather, as he notes, “flaunted his life, becoming a notable figure in his/her special milieu” (de Veyga 1903, 207; translated by Joseph M. Pierce). On the one hand, for de Veyga this case study represents the

possibility that sexual inversion may remain dormant as a genetic disposition and become activated after a psychic or social trauma. On the other, it recalls certain tropes that would continue to be associated with homosexuality over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, such as uncleanliness, a desire for ostentation, gender nonconformity, and deceptiveness. For the Latin American elite, this type of sexual practice represented a pathological threat to reproductive sexuality, one that should be closely monitored and, if possible, cured.

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Dance of the 41). Newspaper reports of the incident ranged from discreet to sensationalist, and the famed artist José Guadalupe Posada (1851–1913) produced a series of etchings depicting the event and its aftermath.

The case of the 41 should be understood within the particular context of Mexico’s political regime at the turn of the century. Known as the Porfiriato, the reign of Porfirio Díaz as president (from 1876 to 1911) was characterized by strong-arm policies, election fraud, and the repression of dissent, but also national investment in modernizing the country under the auspices of scientific investigation. “Order and Progress” became the motto of a regime that saw sexual deviance as not simply a hindrance to modernization but rather the cancerous product of lax cultural attitudes toward pleasure and intimacy. Again, cross-dressing was particularly stigmatized, a practice that challenged social and cultural norms, as well as conservative ideas of sexuality. In this context, the homosexual as transvestite or effeminate man (*maricón*) again serves as a cultural marker for the breakdown of order and the potential for social regression.

In contrast with the Argentine case, however, El Baile de los 41 as a cultural phenomenon was not necessarily

attributed to outside influences or immigration but rather to what was seen as the moral decay of Mexican society from within. In particular, Posada’s art associates transvestism with the emasculated fashion sense of upper-class (ostensibly heterosexual) men, known as *lagartijos* (literally, “lizards”; figuratively, “fops”). The scandal disrupted not only social conventions based on heterosexual norms but also divisions of class, age, and gender. Instead of the schematic rendering of sexuality by Argentine social scientists, at least in Mexico’s popular newspapers, the event was seen through the lens of sexual libertinage. Upper-class men of the Porfiriato were criticized as affected and overly influenced by the artifice of modernity.

This contrast can also be seen by comparing the novel *Los cuarenta y uno: Novela crítico-social* (1906; The forty-one: A socio-critical novel), signed with the pseudonym Eduardo A. Castrejón, which leans on the carnivalesque tradition in Mexico to explain cross-dressing, to Argentine José González Castillo’s (1885–1937) play *Los invertidos* (1914; The inverts/faggots), which portrayed foreign influences such as socialism, anarchism, and homosexual activism as a collective disease that was corrupting Argentine youth. In Mexico, the fear of sexual excess

was eloquently described in Castrejón's novel, which locates the decline of society in the figure of the homosexual: "And into that insatiable vortex of brutal pleasures they have fallen, never to get up. The fallen young men, at the height of stupidity and prostituted degradation, contribute to the bastardization of the human race, committing grave harm against Nature" (quoted and translated in Sifuentes-Jáuregui 2002, 46). Evidently, positivist discourse was not limited to the sciences; it also found expression in literature and art, as with Posada's drawings and Castrejón's *Los cuarenta y uno*. In many cases, literary re-creations of scandalous events, disruptive figures, or pressing social problems provided a more engaging platform for public consumption. The following section turns to the literature of the turn of the century in order to expand on its role in defining sexual identities and practices in Latin America.

In Literature: *Naturalismo* and *Modernismo*

Two major literary currents dominated fin de siècle Latin America: *naturalismo* (naturalism) and *modernismo* (modernism). *Naturalismo* relied on the realistic depiction of social ills, a treatment that privileged scientific terminology and a tendency to pathologize characters deemed to be racially, culturally, or sexually abhorrent. Inspired by the French author Émile Zola, naturalist writers such as Julián Martel, Eugenio Cambaceres, and Manuel Podestá (all from Argentina), Aluísio de Azevedo and Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (both from Brazil), Clorinda Matto de Turner (Argentina/Peru), Alcides Arguedas (Bolivia), and Federico Gamboa (Mexico) took aim at Latin America's history of racial mixing and supposed cultural backwardness vis-à-vis Europe and the United States. Their work often took the form of a diagnostic appraisal of a nation's history and contemporary social problems. In particular, emasculated male characters came to represent the failure of a country to maintain order in this contradictory period. Of note in this regard is a novel from Brazil, Adolfo Caminha's (1867–1897) *Bom-Crioulo* (1895; *Bom-Crioulo: The Black Man and the Cabin Boy* [1982]). *Bom-Crioulo* describes a homosexual relationship between an escaped black slave (slavery was abolished in Brazil in 1888) working as a sailor in the Brazilian navy who falls in love with a young cabin boy, Aleixo. The novel is remarkable for its ambiguous treatment of this relationship, eschewing the moralizing view taken by most naturalist writers. Same-sex desire is the primary engine of this novel, which is structured as a classical tragedy, with Bom-Crioulo killing Aleixo in a fit of jealousy at the end. Typically, however, sexually ambiguous or deviant characters in this period suffer tormented lives and deaths, as in Cuban José Martí's 1885 novel *Lucía Jerez* (also known as *Amistad funesta* [Fatal friendship]) and Chilean Augusto d'Halmar's 1924 novel *La pasión y muerte del*

Cura Deusto (The passion and death of Father Deusto). If in psychiatry the homosexual had to be "cured" through education and therapy, in literature he or she almost always meets a violent end.

Modernismo, in contrast, was a philosophical and aesthetic movement based on strangeness (*rareza*), formal renovation, preciousness of style, and escapist imagery. *Modernismo* was perhaps the most important literary movement to come from Latin America, and *modernistas* such as José Martí (1853–1895; Cuba), Rubén Darío (1867–1916; Nicaragua), and José Enrique Rodó (1871–1917; Uruguay) revolutionized the way sensuality was understood in the region. On the one hand, these writers were inspired by French *decadentistas* (the decadent movement), who posited the body as a site of pleasure and perversion, and on the other, such an open transgression of decorum was met with skepticism in Latin America. For example, Darío's *Los raros* (The strange/queer ones), published in 1896, is a series of personality sketches, primarily of French symbolists, that at once celebrates their aesthetic sensibilities and reproduces homophobic discourses around sensuality and eroticism. Latin American *modernismo* looked to figures such as Walt Whitman, Paul Verlaine, and Oscar Wilde in a complex framework of admiration and reticence. While never identified specifically as homosexual, the strangeness of these *raros* served to highlight Darío's modernity. Still, their sexual ambiguity and the sensuality of their work was grounds for censure by Latin American critics.

The most prominent example of this contradictory position is Rodó's 1900 essay *Ariel*, which attempts to provide a corrective to what the author believed to be the overly sensual poetics of *modernismo* at the turn of the century. Rodó proposes a spiritual and anti-utilitarian reformation of Latin American aesthetics, one more in keeping with a conservative vein of intellectualism in the region. Nevertheless, homoeroticism and corporeal sensuality would resurface in Latin American letters, such as in the work of Julián del Casal (Cuba), José Asunción Silva (Colombia), Delmira Agustini (Uruguay), and Salvador Novo (Mexico), as aesthetic trends moved toward the avant-garde after World War I (1914–1918).

As noted earlier in the case of the *lagartijo*, these aesthetics were also applied to the bodies, dress, and attitudes of those producers of literary texts. As with the *lagartijo*, the figure of the dandy came to represent the modernization and cultural acumen of bourgeois men (but also some women), as well as the potential excesses of artifice. The adornment of men's bodies, their preoccupation with style, and the unpredictable nature of their speech and gestures led to contradictory understandings of gender as performative, as a pose. The dandy was a nonconformist—a provocateur—interested in beauty, elegance, and eccentricity in a period marked by the

gradual decline of the elite and the relative homogenization of culture. Thus, for artists interested in standing out in the ever-growing and always mistrusted crowd, dandyism represented a shift toward individual style and ostentation. This shift was controversial in many of the same ways as *modernismo*: by pushing the limits of aesthetic propriety, both forms of representation were revising the way gender and sexuality were understood as relative and relational rather than as biologically determined.

Across Latin America in the fin de siècle period, the rapid pace of modernization led to massive shifts in demographics, politics, and modes of life. Social anxiety—especially on the part of Latin American elites—over the future of Latin American nations found expression in the scientific community, which used positivism to justify the examination of sexual pathologies in an effort to explain the supposed decadence of groups such as immigrants, the working class, homosexuals, and transvestites. Social scientists adapted European models to local populations and attempted to “correct” deviant identities and practices in the name of order and progress. However, a close examination of the period reveals how the interrelated spheres of science, art, and culture did not universally reject sexual difference and gender variance. Instead, for members of the elite, the contradictions of modernity reflected a simultaneous fascination with individual expression, fear of cultural decadence, and disdain for populist rhetoric. The supposed objectivity of positivist science allowed upper-class politicians to attempt to control the future of Latin American populations. Yet in looking to Europe for inspiration, many of those same politicians (writers and artists) became enamored with stylistic innovations that were seen by critics as overly sensual or even queer (*raro*). Modernity implied simultaneously seeking to promote a specific cultural identity and adapting to new and at times revolutionary ideas. In literature and art as in science and politics, the Latin American fin de siècle staged the negotiation of contradictory ideologies, people, and desires. This complicated period underscores the paradox of control and repression, liberalism and the expansion of individual freedoms—issues that continue to inform Latin American politics to this day.

SEE ALSO *El Baile de los 41*; Bom-Crioulo (1895; Adolfo Ferreira Caminha)

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